DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 073 CS 203 600

AUTHOR O'Hayre, John
TITLE Gobbledygook Has Gotta Go.
INSTITUTION Bureau of Land Management (Dept. of Interior), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 108p.; Best copy available
AVAILABLE FROM Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 (Stock No. 024-011-00002-0, Write for price)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$6.01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Problems; *Composition Skills (Literary); *Expository Writing; *Government Publications; Language Usage; Sentence Structure; *Technical Writing; *Writing Skills; Written Language

ABSTRACT

Frequently, government writing is filled with complex and obscure jargon, or "gobbledygook." This book was written for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) employees, in order to call their attention to the need for simple, concise writing. The first two chapters provide a formula for judging the difficulty of a piece of writing and show how writers can use the formula in attempting to simplify their writing. Other chapters discuss the following topics: words and their meanings; avoiding the use of obscure technical jargon; avoiding complexity and pomposity in writing; using specific, concrete words to convey abstract ideas; writing sentences that say what they are intended to say; using active verbs to enliven writing; using effective word order in sentences; observing basic principles of good writing; the high monetary cost of using more words than are necessary in writing; and writing news releases. The book includes numerous examples of "gobbledygook" in BLM publications and discusses ways in which the examples might be improved. (GW)

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GOBBLEDYGOOK HAS GOTTA GO

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Mr. Gobble D Gook. Esq

CS203600

This book was written by John O'Hayre, an employee of the Bureau of Land Management's Denver, Colo., Service Center, in the interest of better written communications on the part of all Bureau employees.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
Bureau of Land Management.

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402 - Price $1.20
Stock Number 024-011-00002-0
Catalog Number I 53.2:G53

PREFACE

THE Bureau of Land Management is people, a scattering of persons in nearly 100 towns across the continent. We become an organization only when we work intelligently together to reach common goals. And we can work together this way only when we understand each other, when we communicate clearly.

Our communications have sometimes failed because of a fascination with the traditions of officialese, an in-grown compulsion to be impressively ornate rather than simply direct, to be "proper" rather than personal. We've had costly false starts because of false notions about written communications, because of our failure to read our own writing through the other fellow's eyes.

If we are to succeed in these times of new technologies, new demands and new attitudes, we must improve our communications radically. We must abandon soggy formality and incoherence in favor of modern personal communications. This book points the way in 16 essays.

No longer can gobblydegook be allowed to clog communication lines. Every BLM employee, regardless of rank or position, must adapt to the philosophy of simple, direct, personal communications indicated in these essays.

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WHAT THIS BOOK IS ALL ABOUT

THIS is not a grammar book for government writers who think that if they only knew more grammar rules they could write more easily and better. Nor is it a theoretical textbook for those who think they can learn good writing by learning more theories about writing, for precious little writing is learned from gathering theories.

This book is a collection of essays, sometimes sharply critical essays, that deal with what's wrong with government writing. And it's a book filled with samples of countless "wrongs" which, added up, account for what people outside of government derisively call "government gobbledygook."

The convictions behind this book are simple and few: Government writers are trying to carry on the world's biggest, most complex business with outdated, outmoded, tradition-logged language based on an outdated, outmoded, tradition-logged philosophy of communications, a philosophy probably all right 50 or a hundred years ago, when it didn't take so much paper work to do the job, when much of the vast working force of the government and the Nation didn't even have to know how to read and write to get a job done; when bureaucracy, democracy, mass production, mass education, and science had not yet reached the age of puberty. But those relatively simple days were "the days when," and they are no longer with us. Yet we go on writing a stuffy, literary-based language as though nothing had changed in the last hundred years.

It's past time government writers realized that a revolution has taken place in American prose, a revolution that started years ago and is operating today at fever pitch. Newspapermen, magazine writers, and fiction writers have joined in this revolution that demands simple, concise, clear prose. But not so, government writers! The flossy, pompous, abstract, complex, jargonistic gobbledygook that passes for communications in government "has gotta go!" It's too out-of-date to renovate; it's too expensive to tolerate.

The revolution in writing was started by people who looked the reality of the Great Depression straight in the face, and by millions who lived through World War II and the Korean war in a dangerous, fast-changing world of hard and sometimes bitter facts. These millions are demanding that today's language reflect today's world and not some sweeter time now past. And they have a right to demand this, for unless writing is an expression of its age, it is nothing.

THE "WRITE" FORMULA

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NOBODY can learn to be a writer by using a mathematical formula, for writing is what is inside a man and how it comes out in words. No mathematical formula can measure that. Nevertheless, formulas have helped many writers measure the readability of their writing. We have found them helpful to a point, but there are two important things no readability formula can do: (1) measure the contents, the information in a message, or (2) evaluate the style. A sloppy style may rate well on the formulas; while, on the other hand, a highly readable style like that of the late Winston Churchill may not do well at all.

Because few formulas can measure contents or style, they fail to teach writing to any appreciable degree. That is why in our formula, called the *Lensear Write Formula*,[1] we try to shift the emphasis from "readability" to "writeability." We are concerned not so much with the reader as with the writer.

Rather than counting every syllable or only words of three syllables or more, we concentrate on words which make up nearly three-fourths of plain English, the words most natural to the language, especially its native nouns and verbs, its one-syllable words. When the writer deals with the words most natural to English, he learns how to handle the language.

Next to Chinese, English is the most monosyllabic major language. The formula stresses one-syllable words, not just because of their occurrence in plain English, but because (1) many of the strongest verbs are of one syllable, and strong verbs are the guts of good writing; (2) there is a vigorous tendency to form strong, active verbs with verb-adverb combinations such as "put up with," "fall away from," "stand up to," "go for," "hold up," "put a stop to," etc.; forms you can use to describe even the most complex or abstract actions.

The Write Formula has a feature that goes a long way toward protecting the writer from falling into the passive voice, a weakness of much Government writing. In counting one-syllable words we do not count these one-syllable verbs: "is", "are", "was", and "were". Since these verbs are so often used to form the weak passive voice, our formula "emphasizes them out," and the writer is forced into using stronger verbs. Another word we do not count is "the." It simply isn't needed in a good many cases.

One thing the Write Formula has in common with some others is that it measures sentence length. Research shows that readers prefer short sentences, on 18- to 20-word average. By giving points for shortness, the writer is encouraged to create a short sentence average.

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[1] The *Lensear Write Formula* is copyrighted. Permission to use herewith assigned to Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior.

Here's how to use the Write Formula:

(1) Count a 100-word sample.
(2) Count all one-syllable words except "the", "is", "are", "was", and "were". Count one point for each one-syllable word.
(3) Count the number of sentences in the 100-word sample to the nearest period or semicolon and give three points for each sentence.
(4) Add together the one-syllable word count and the three points for each sentence to get your grade.

For example, if you have 55 one-syllable words in your 100-word sample, with each worth 1 point, and if you have 5 sentences (semicolons count as periods), your total score will be 70.

If your piece has less than 100 words, multiply your tally to get the equivalent of 100: Multiply a 25-word sample by 4; a 33-word sample by 3; a 61-word sample by 1.65, etc.

If you tally between 70 and 80 points, you are in the right bracket for the average adult reader. A score of 80 is close to ideal, but if you score over 85 you may be getting too simple; if you drop much below 70, you're too complicated unless you are writing as a technician to another technician in the same specialized field.

A score of 75 or 80 means you can get through to an average American reader. This kind of uncomplicated writing is preferred by most college graduates, but can also reach high school graduates. The "think" magazines like *Harpers* and *Atlantic* come out between 65 and 70. *Time* and the *Wall Street Journal* run between 70 and 75. *Reader's Digest* floats between 75 and 85. *Children's Digest* ranges upward from 85 to over 100.

The formula may seem easy; it's gnashingly tough. It will not let you rest on the one-syllable connectives and prepositions, but will force you to use the strong verbs and colorful nouns so lacking in gobbledygook. It will force you to write as good writers do: with the strong, clear, active words nongovernment English is blessed with.

Use the formula until you feel you understand its purpose, then forget it except for periodic checkups to see if you're still writing within readable limits.

A FIRST LOOK AT GOBBLEDYGOOK

A DISGRUNTLED State director tossed a copy of a memo on our desk some time back. "Here's a lusty sample of what good writing ain't", he said. "Maybe you can use it to show some of our staff how not to write"

He picked up the memo and rattled it, saying: "All I did was write this solicitor a short memo. I told him I thought we could solve a nasty trespass case we'd both been working on. We suggested we give this trespasser a special-use permit and make him legal. That way we'd all get off the hook. All I asked the solicitor was, 'is this okay with you?'"

He threw the memo on the desk and scowled. "Cripes! All he had to do was say 'yes' or 'no'. But look what he sends me!"

Properly meek by this time, I asked: "Did the solicitor say 'yes' or 'no'?"

The State director whirled: "How the heck do I know! I've only read it twice!"

There was no doubt about it, that State director had a problem; he simply couldn't get readable writing out of his staff, or, more important this day, his solicitor.

Our distressed State director wasn't alone in his sweat over unreadable writing. Leaders in government, business, and industry have had the same feverish feeling for years. One chemical company executive put it this way: "If our antifreeze had the same quality as our writing, we'd rust out half the radiators in the country in 6 months."

A study showed executives in one company used 200 words to write 125-word memos, 8 paragraphs for 4-paragraph letters, and nearly 200 pages for 100-page reports. Another corporation finally got so frustrated it quit trying to hire writers and started training the ones it already had. Most big corporations are doing this now; they have to. This way they get good writing and save good money—lots of it. An average letter's cost varies from $6 for top executives to $2—lower levels.

Let's read the memo that shook up the State director:

To: State Director
From: John Lawbook, Solicitor
Subject: Roland Occupancy Trespass

This responds to your memorandum dated February 21, 1964, requesting that we review and comment concerning the subject Roland trespass on certain lands under reclamation withdrawal.

We appreciate your apprising us of this matter and we certainly concur that appropriate action is in order to protect the interests of the United States.

We readily recognize the difficult problem presented by this situation, and if it can be otherwise satisfactorily resolved, we would prefer to avoid trespass action. If you determine it permissible to legalize the Roland occupancy and hay production by issuance of a special use permit, as suggested in your memorandum, we have no objection to that procedure.

Any such permit should be subject to cancellation when the lands are actively required for reclamation purposes and should provide for the right

of the officers, agents, and employees of the United States at all times to have unrestricted access and ingress to, passage over, and egress from all said lands, to make investigations of all kinds, dig test pits and drill test holes, to survey for reclamation and irrigation works, and to perform any and all necessary soil and moisture conservation work.

If we can be of any further assistance in this matter, please advise. We would appreciate being informed of the disposition of this problem.

Before we edit the solicitor's memo, let's look at two of its weak points:

1. *False Opening*: The solicitor starts his memo by telling the State director; "This is my memo to you, answering your memo to me." Who could care less? Openings like this tell nobody nothing. Yet many memos and letters start in this word-wasteful manner.

2. *Writer's Grade*: The solicitor's memo has 217 words, 44 difficult words, 3 syllables or over, and a writer's grade of 53; it should grade out at 70 or above to be reasonably readable. A high grade means that, even if you're not saying what you mean, you're saying it readably well. Your sentences are short, your constructions simple, and your words are not painfully syllabic. A high writer's grade is a guarantee of readable writing. With it you're in business as a writer; without it you're in trouble with the reader.

A basic rule for all writing is: Have something to say; say it simply; quit! The next rule is: After you've quit, go over it again with a harsh pencil and a vengeance, crossing out everything that isn't necessary.

Let's see if the solicitor's memo takes well to the pencil. On our first trip through, in order to be fair to the solicitor, we won't change any of his words or word order.

Let's start penciling out:

"~~This responds to your memorandum dated February 21, 1964, requesting that we review and comment~~ concerning the ~~subject~~ Roland trespass ~~on certain lands under reclamation withdrawal. We appreciate your apprising us of this matter and~~ we ~~certainly~~ concur that ~~appropriate~~ action is in order ~~to protect the interests of the United States.~~

"~~We readily recognize the difficult problem presented by this situation, and if it can be otherwise satisfactorily resolved,~~ we would prefer to avoid trespass action. If you determine it permissible to legalize the Roland occupancy ~~and hay production~~ by issuance of a special use permit, ~~as suggested in your memorandum~~, we have no objection ~~to that procedure.~~

"Any such permit should be subject to cancellation ~~when the lands are actively required for reclamation purposes~~ and should provide for the

right of ~~the officers, agents, and employees of~~ the United States at all times ~~to have unrestricted access and ingress to, passage over, and egress from all said lands, to make investigations of all kinds, dig test pits and drill test holes, to survey for reclamation and irrigation works, and~~ to perform any ~~and all~~ necessary ~~soil and moisture conservation~~ work.

~~"If we can be of any further assistance in this matter, please advise.~~ We would appreciate being informed of the disposition of this problem."

What did we accomplish in this quick trip? Well, let's see. We cut the number of words from 217 to 75, cut the difficult words from 44 to 10, and raised the writer's grade from 53 (difficult) to 68 (acceptable).

Can we cut more yet? Let's go over it again and see, still without changing the solicitor's words or word order.

First sentence: Concerning the Roland Trespass case, we concur that action is in order.

We can throw this whole sentence out, because: (1) the subject heading of the memo clearly states what the memo concerns; and (2) both knew "action was in order." That's why they had been writing each other.

Second and third sentences: We would prefer to avoid trespass action. If you determine it permissible to legalize Roland's occupancy by issuance of a special use permit, we have no objection.

Let's leave this for now; it contains the essence of the memo; it's the answer.

Fourth sentence: Any such permit should be subject to cancellation and should provide for the right of the United States at all times to perform all necessary work.

Let's throw this out, too. The State director and his staff issue special use permits as a matter of routine. They know what cancellation clauses and special-use provisions these have to carry. Why tell them what they already know?

Fifth sentence: We would appreciate being informed of the disposition of this problem.

Let's leave this sentence as it is and see what we have left after two editings.

We would prefer to avoid trespass action. If you determine it permissible to legalize Roland's occupancy by issuance of a special use permit, we have no objection.

We would appreciate being informed of the disposition of the problem.

A recount shows we're now down to 38 words, 8 difficult words, and have a a writer's grade of 68.

The question now is: Does the edited memo carry the essential message and does it read easily? It does both pretty well. However, it could have a little more clarity and a little less pretension if it said simply:

> We'd like to avoid trespass action, if possible. So, if you can settle this case by issuing Roland a special use permit, go ahead.
> Please keep us informed.

This is the way we would have written the memo had we been in the solicitor's seat. The memo now has 28 words, 2 difficult words, and a writer's grade of 70. That's good writing.

Let's go back to the original memo. What we did first was to concentrate on axing out empty words and phrases. Note how they strain to sound unnatural—and succeed. Note how they can be replaced with simple, direct words.

> First and second sentences: This responds to your memorandum dated February 21, 1964, requesting that we review and comment concerning the subject Roland trespass on certain lands under reclamation withdrawal. We appreciate your apprising us of this matter, and we certainly concur that appropriate action is in order to protect the interests of the United States.

How much better had he said: "Got your memo on the Roland trespass case. You're right; action is needed."

> Third sentence: We readily recognize the difficult problem presented by this situation, and if it can be otherwise satisfactorily resolved, we would prefer to avoid trespass action.

Why didn't he just say, "The problem *is* tough, and we'd like to avoid trespass action if we can."?

> Fourth sentence: If you determine it permissible to legalize Roland's occupancy by issuance of a special use permit, as suggested in your memorandum, we have no objection to that procedure.

It's a lot clearer this way: "If you can solve this problem by issuing Roland a special use permit, go ahead."

> Fifth sentence: Any such permit should be subject to cancellation when the lands are actively required for reclamation purposes and should provide for the right of officers, agents and employees of the United States at all times to have unrestricted access and ingress to, passage over, and egress from all said lands, to make investigations of all kinds, dig test pits and drill test holes, to survey for reclamation and irrigation works, and to perform any and all necessary soil and moisture conservation work.

Such a lawyerish enumeration belongs, if it belongs at all, in a legal contract, not in an inter-office memo. If the solicitor felt an obligation to give the State director a reminder, he might have said: "Please spell out the Government's cancellation rights and right-to-use provisions in the permit."

> Sixth and seventh sentences (adequate but somewhat high-blown): If we can be of any further assistance in this matter, please advise. We would appreciate being informed of the disposition of this problem.

It's somewhat better, at least shorter, this way: "If we can be of further help, please call. Keep us informed."

How does the whole, empty-word-less memo read now? Would it, too, be satisfactory? Let's look:

> Got your memo on the Roland trespass case. You're right; action is needed. The problem *is* tough, and we'd like to avoid trespass action if we can. So, if you can settle this case by issuing Roland a special-use permit,

go ahead. Please spell out the Government's cancellation rights and right-to-use provisions in the permit.

If we can be of further help, please call. Keep us informed.

In this version we have 70 words, only four difficult words, and a writer's grade of 69.

Moreover, we've said everything the solicitor said in his original memo, even the stuff that didn't need saying. The only difference is that we threw out the empty words, shortened the sentences, changed the passive to the active, and generally tried to say things simply, directly and clearly. The gobbledygook is gone!

ONE LITTLE WORD LEADS TO ANOTHER

WORDS and their meanings, as Aldous Huxley says, are not mere matters. The nature of both has plagued philosophers for centuries. Men of the past such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Kant, Berkeley, and Hume, and such men of our times as Korzybski, James, and Hayakawa, have wrestled with these "mere matters of words."

While philosophers thought about words, poets sang about them. Shelley said: "He created words, and words created thoughts; and thoughts are the measure of the universe."

One of Shelley's critics charged the poet with putting the effect before the cause, and he changed him to read: "He created thoughts, and thoughts created words; thoughts are the measure of the universe, and words are the measure of thoughts."

Words have been seen as the measure of God in man . . . the measure of man in God . . . the measure of man's thoughts . . . the measure of man's universe. But always, somehow, in some way, words are seen as the measure of man. No poet or philosopher has ever denied that. Nor have they ever denied that man's words are things of dignity and power, richness and beauty, knowledge and learning. Proverbs says it this way: "Words fitly spoken are like apples of gold in bowls of silver."

If man's words are so precious and so noble, what, then, are they? Like so many things man uses, his words can best be seen, not in what they are but in what they do. Our definitions of words are neither philosophical nor poetical; they are practical, working definitions; they show us man's words at work—at work in men's minds.

A Word in Itself: A word in itself is nothing; it is merely a set of spoken or written symbols that STANDS for things that have meaning to man. Charlton Laird said that meaning is not the word; meaning is in man's mind; no two minds are alike.

Therefore, no one word ever means exactly the same thing to any two people. If you think a word has meaning in itself, what meaning does the word "BAR" have? Think about it: the three symbols, "A", "B", and "R", assembled to "BAR". You can see the word "BAR" means nothing in your mind until it refers your mind to something it already knows. Depending on how the word symbols for "BAR" go to work in your mind, they could mean any one of a dozen or more things, such as a BAR for boozing, a BAR for prying, to BAR a guest, a BAR for exercising, a BAR for prisoners, a BAR meaning lawyers, a BAR of soap or candy, a snack BAR, a BAR on a door or a gate, a BAR on a shield or a flag, a support BAR, the BAR of a horse's mouth, the BAR of a bridle, a BAR of silver or gold, a sand BAR, a needlework BAR, a BAR to health, etc. . . .

It's a little hard to believe but the *Oxford Dictionary* carries 14,070 differ-

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ent definitions for the 500 most used words in English. This is an average of 28 separate definitions per word.

We lead each other to misunderstanding when we use a word as though it had meaning in itself and when we mistakenly assume that our reader would use exactly the same word in precisely the same manner to express the true meaning.

A Word's Referent: Each word has what is called a referent, or plural referents. A word's referent is the actual thing which exists apart from the mind and which the word stands for and presents to the mind.

This referent can be specific, concrete, and sharp, such as that *black widow spider*, your *office desk*, or your *mother's picture;* or these referents can be general, abstract, and vague—such as the *nation's dedicated conservationists*, the *principles of sound management*, or *multiple-use concepts.*

Referents usually represent the "core meaning of words," the meaning society generally has agreed on and which is normally spelled out in dictionaries.

However, it's good to remember that people don't have as much trouble keeping up with the words in the dictionaries as dictionaries have in keeping up with the words in people. Some of us forget that people and words existed long before dictionaries, and that dictionaries exist solely because people use, re-use, quit using, throw away, make up and remake words every day. And as they do so they set standards for word usage, style and meaning which it is the job of dictionaries to collect and record. Dictionaries are literally overflowing with definitions people don't use any more, and people are literally overflowing with definitions dictionaries have not yet recorded.

This same "people came first" is also true for grammar books, heretical as that may sound. The people's language makes the rules for grammar books; the rules in grammar books do not make the people's language. And, like dictionaries, grammar books often lag far behind the people's standards of usage, style, and meaning.

The only difference between dictionaries and grammar books is that dictionaries do not include words people never used, while grammar books do include rules people never did and never will use. That means dictionaries are doing what dictionaries are supposed to do. Not so most grammar books.

We make these "people first" points only because too many pedants would have us believe that dictionaries and grammar books, especially grammar books, were somehow divinely revealed and sent down to us from some sort of Mount Sinai of words.

Mind you, we don't say dictionaries and grammar books are not necessary and shouldn't be used; they are necessary, and they should be used. But they shouldn't be used to frighten people who have to write. Too many of us are "scared stiff" that we don't know enough of what's in dictionaries and grammar books to write well.

This fear, of course, is nonsense. Big words and grammar rules are one thing; writing well is quite another. If you got average grades in an average school, you know enough of the former to learn to do the latter.

A word's referent(s), then, is the actual thing that exists apart from the mind and which the word stands for and presents to the mind. It is usually defined in dictionaries and is sometimes called a word's *denotation*, which means all that strictly belongs to the word's definition.

A Word's Reference: A word's reference is the personal memories and experiences the word calls up in the mind of each person when he sees it. These references ALWAYS give "personal meaning," "emotional meaning," "memory meaning," "psychological meaning," "environmental meaning," meanings not found in dictionaries; meanings found only and differently in each person's mind.

Grammar books often call a word's references its connotation, its suggested meaning. However, connotation usually means those feelings that have grown up around a word's use—especially through poetry and history—while reference usually means those personal feelings that have grown up around the word in the reader's mind.

Like a word's referents, those things outside the mind, a word's references, those memory meanings inside the mind, can be specific, concrete, and powerful—such as the memories and experiences the word "rattlesnake" might call up in your mind if you'd ever been bitten by one; or like the memories and experiences the name "June" might call up, if that was the name of your very first girl; or like the word "heartburn," if you have ulcers.

Or these references can be general, abstract, and obscure. This usually happens when the things these words are "references to"—those they refer to—are themselves general, abstract, and vague. For instance, what kind of personal memories and experiences do the general-abstract words, "a multifarious groups of competent technicians" call up in your mind? If you got any personal "reference" at all, it was probably a vague, nebulous, far-off, unclear sketch of something—you're not quite sure just what.

General Words: General words name whole groups of things: people . . . structures . . . programs . . . animals . . . machines . . . devices . . . clothing . . . mountains . . . directives . . . etc.

These general words are usually hard for the reader's mind to handle, since broad categories, unlimited numbers, and wide-sweeping terms—like spilled jigsaw puzzles—seldom give a clear, unified picture of the one or the few things they're supposed to represent. These general words usually contain such a mass of meaning the reader's mind simply can't sift through it all and focus on the one particlar meaning he's supposed to be getting.

General terms have degrees of generality; they can spread out horizontally like flood waters in a long, low valley. See, for instance, how the general term, "soil surface disturbances," spreads out: The writer meant it to mean "ditching on the contour," but it meant such things to different readers as

"an earthworm network" . . . "prairie-dog town" . . . "dance of a dust devil" . . . "gully wash" . . . "rock slide" . . . "mud slide" . . . "ice flow" . . . "atomic explosion" . . . "earthquake" . . . "birth of a mountain range" . . . "end of the world" . . . etc.

Which of these is not a "soil surface disturbance?" They all are, of course. So, when our writer chose such a term to describe "ditching on the contour," he was playing it cool. The words not only meant what he meant, they meant a million things he didn't mean. That is why general words, even though they are easy for the writer to find and use, seldom give the reader a particular picture of any one thing.

General words can also spread vertically—carrying the individual thing up through groups, families, species, genuses, classes, all the way to the kingdom at the top. Each time an individual thing is absorbed in the definition of a higher group, the individual thing loses more of its individual marks and becomes harder and harder for the reader's mind to find

See what can happen to Rancher Richard's prize Angus bull, Gargoyle. He is first absorbed by the more general term, *herd* of Angus, where he becomes harder to find; then he and the whole herd are absorbed by the next more general term, *cattle*, where he is harder yet to find; then they all are absorbed in the next more general term, *ruminant*. Of course, our Angus bull, Gargoyle, is still included in the general term, ruminant, but so are millions of other mammals. So again, it's hard for the reader to sift old Gargoyle out of all that animal mass—and that's no bull; it's simply the way with general words.

See what happens in your own mind when you read these general terms; see what specific, particular image and meaning you get from them; see what specific referents and references the words call up in you:

> All of the many available small tracts are generally similar in having irregular topography, sparse vegetative cover, and light to medium timber stands.

No doubt you can get almost any mental image and meaning you want to from these general words, for they do indeed contain images, meanings, and possible meanings by the hundreds. But it's just as true you can't construct from these general small-tract words a clear, distinct, vivid, visible image of any one of the "many available small tracts."

This same thing happens when you generalize with such terms as "large crowds," "suitable structures," "bureau responsibilities," "impressive ceremonies," etc. These terms contain, in a vague, far-off way, your particular meaning and image; but they also contain just about any possible meaning your reader needs to give them. He sees so many possible meanings in your general words, he has to guess at the one meaning you probably meant to give him. And when a reader goes to guessing, the writer's in a dangerous word-game.

You'll naturally have to use general words in your writing, but when your writing gets too heavy with them, it gets dull and dies; it tires and bores

your reader. Your general words simply include too much for him.

Specific Words: Specific words, on the other hand, strip away mass or group meaning by naming things individually, one at a time, like this man, *Dan Saults* . . . this *Mickle* wire-stretcher . . . this *jeep-driven* posthole digger . . . this *Gas and Electric* Building . . . this *Pike's Peak* Mountain, etc.

These specific words enter man's mind easily and naturally and well-defined, for man's mind accepts things best when they are offered one at a time and when they call up specific referents and references—as specific words do.

The reader's mind can always find the many through the one; it can seldom find the one through the many. And the chances of the reader getting lost in a mass of meaning are remote when you use specific words. When you say a "contour ditch" you not only mean what you say, you don't say what you don't mean, which is what happened when a prairie-dog house, the birth of a mountain range, and a gully wash were all included under the general term, "soil surface disturbance."

Abstract Words: Abstract words name intangible things of condition, quality, or idea—such as . . . beauty . . . culture . . . efficiency . . . feasibility . . . loyalty . . . effectiveness . . . wealth . . . etc.

These abstract words are also hard for the reader's mind to handle, for the things they stand for have no real existence outside of the existence man's mind gives them. In short, these abstract words have no concrete referents—no solid or real things outside the mind to which the mind can compare them.

It's true you'll find these abstract words defined in dictionaries, but never as something real in themselves; only as something existing in other real things—such as the *color* in skin, the *size* in numbers, the *time* in clocks, the *depth* in a program, the *efficiency* in an office, etc.

These abstract words, like general words, are so broad, so unmeasurable, and so full of so many different meanings they can be spread out to mean almost anything. And, like general words, abstract words have degrees of abstraction, and the higher the degree, the more difficult for the reader to find concrete meaning.

See how the abstract word "efficient" can spread out horizontally becoming dimmer and dimmer in the reader's mind as it goes from an efficient worker to an efficient staff, to an efficient bureau, to an efficient department, to an efficient government. You can see that, on its horizontal spread, the abstract word picks up a general word to "exist in," and they spread fog together. So the reader gets the double-barrelled effect of countless possible meanings.

Or an abstract word can spread vertically, going immediately into the world of idea, where it is stripped of all concrete or specific marks of individuality. Take Rancher Richard's Angus bull, Gargoyle, for example. Gargoyle can be stripped of his "Angusness" by being translated into a paper property as a *ranch asset*, then abstracted further to become a part of the

county's *wealth*, and then abstracted even further to become a part of the *Gross National Product*. It's true old Gargoyle is still included in the idea of Gross National Product, but so are billions of other products.

Or see how the Denver District's jeep loses its identity through abstraction: It can go from one jeep to all jeeps—to all vehicles—to all government transportation—to a government cost—to the national budget—to the wealth of our economy.

See if your mind can grab onto any concrete specific meaning in these abstract words; or are they like general words—meaning so much of everything, they don't really mean much of anything?

> The feasibility of the proposed multifarious programs was projected on a long-range basis and given adequate cogitation and consideration.

No doubt you see something in that sentence, but whatever it is you see it's vague, far-out and fuzzy. Why? Simply because there isn't a bureau, a division, a department, a company, a school board, or any other kind of a board that couldn't write the same sentence and have it mean just as much as ours did. That particular sentence is so abstract and carries so much meaning it can mean anything and/or everything to everybody. That's the "beauty" of abstract words. That's why writers gravitate to them naturally: they're popular, easy to find, easy to use, and they can mean anything you want them to mean . . . to anybody. But here again, you set your reader to guessing at what particular meaning you wanted him to get out of all the many meanings your abstract words gave him. As we said, when the reader has to start guessing, the writer had better start packing.

As with general words, there's a place and a need for abstract words in your writing. But when your writing gets too heavy with them, your reader will get tired and confused. He just doesn't have the energy to go on looking at words that refuse to yield precise, concrete meaning without a fierce and agonizing struggle that involves a lot of guessing.

Concrete Words: Concrete words, as opposed to abstract ones, name real things and real people as they exist in their own flesh, and as they are presented to man's mind through his imagination, from one or more of his five senses: his eyes, ears, taste, touch, and smell. These concrete sense-words are the guts of all good writing; they are as natural to man's mind as wet to water, air to lungs, heat to fire, light to film, smell to garbage.

Aristotle pointed out the importance of sense-words to meaning in man's mind over 2,300 years ago when he said that there is nothing in man's mind that was not FIRST in some way in one or more of his five senses. Even his most profound thoughts and his most abstract ideas have their beginnings in his senses.

Act of Communication: When you communicate, you take an idea that's in your head and you put it into another's head through words. This "act" might seem like a trivial thing, simply because it's so ordinary and so routine,

but it happens to be the noblest thing that man does that animals can't—the very thing that makes man unique—makes him king in the animal world.

Animals communicate, that's true. But not like you and I do; not anything like we do.

Your dog may be able to tell you when he's hungry, but not when he isn't. Nor can he tell you he isn't hungry if he is; or is hungry if he's not. Nor can he tell you to take back the canned dog food with the fish meal in it and bring him instead some ground round with kidney roll on the side.

Nor can animals leave their talk and experiences recorded in histories and literature for their children and their children's children to read and study, to find out what mistakes older generations made and to set about building a better world. Animals live only on their individual experiences of today; they do not live on the recorded cumulative experiences of animals throughout history as men do.

As Einstein said, the uniqueness of man—the superiority of man in the world of animals—lies not only in his ability to perceive ideas but to perceive that he perceives; and to transfer his ideas and perceptions to other men's minds through words.

E. A. Stauffen pointed out the beauty and power in an *Act of Communication* between one man and another. He said:

> When we exchange ideas through words, we are in the realm of the immaterial—a realm where no other material thing may follow. We can see this easily enough.
>
> The more we share material things by dividing them, the smaller and smaller these things become, until they are too small to be divided any more. The opposite happens when we share our immaterial ideas through words.
>
> See how these differ:
>
> Say you have $100 and you meet 100 men who are hungry; and you give each man $1 for food. Then say each man takes his dollar and buys lunch and eats it. What has happened in all of this?
>
> Well, let's see. You no longer have your $100; you now have nothing. Each of your 100 men no longer has his $1, and his food is gone, too. That is the way with material things.
>
> But what happens if you have one idea and meet 100 mentally hungry men? You, of course, give them your idea, but don't lose it by giving it, like you lost your $100 when you gave it away. Also, the 100 men you gave your idea to can in turn give it away—and still keep it—to any number of other people. And these people can in turn give it away yet keep it; add to it and subtract from it to make it a more perfect idea—one which, if it's great enough, will go on for centuries, perhaps forever.
>
> Therefore, when you use words to put an idea that's in your mind into another man's mind—when you perform this *Act of Communication*—you are doing the noblest work of man. And such a noble work should never be carelessly nor slovenly done. For your ideas and your words are as much a part of your human nature as your breath, your blood, or your brain.

And that, we think, is what Huxley had in mind when he said that words are never mere matters, or what the poets had in mind when they said that words are the measure of man.

SHOP TALK

BY tradition, Government writing is so loaded with status-seeking or "way-out" technical jargon that people outside our special word-worlds seldom see much in it except the author's self-fascination. Take this bit of shop talk, for example:

> Temperature is a most important factor in determining the ecological optimum and limits of crop growth, and therefore the agricultural exploitation of our water and soil resources.
>
> Like precipitation measurements, temperature is probably measured within the present accuracy of our knowledge of temperature effects on resource utilization and provides us with a standard measurement which can be linked empirically or theoretically to specific environmental applications.

We didn't find one person that fully understood what the weather-expert-author was talking about. The writer wasted all those big words. Technical jargons are common to almost every trade and profession. At times it seems that each vie with the others to attain a superior height of complexity. So intense has this struggle for special identity become that even specialists within a single field are often baffled by the jargon of their cohorts. The outsider is completely lost. The following sample is proof enough; see if it doesn't lose you:

> The appropriate concepts of cost and gain depend upon the level of optimization, and the alternative policies that are admissible. This appropriate level of optimization and the alternatives that should be compared depend in part on the search for a suitable criterion.

This excerpt is typical of the jargon throughout a report brought to us for recommendations. When we advised the author to rewrite it in simple language that all of us could understand, he complained that it couldn't be done. But he did it, finishing it only after much agony and many rewrites. And it was simple language when he got through.

Now we shouldn't get the idea that technical jargon is always bad, never to be used. Carefully written technical language can be accurate and economical when used between technicians working closely together in a narrow field, between experts in identical technical areas. But it is dangerous when used to communicate with technicians in other fields or with the general public.

The problem of technical language is especially thorny in government, because there are so many of us under one roof; there are literally hundreds of different occupations and professions, each with its own shop talk; there are so many offices, bureaus, and departments to spawn esoteric and prideful language of an exclusive, pseudo-aristocratic nature. (Like the last part of that sentence you just read.) So it's little wonder we have such a hard time communicating and why we so often fail to communicate with people on the outside.

Most of us in government are not aware of how deeply our writing is affected and infected by technical jargon. Most of us refuse to recognize

that fact that all of us don't speak the same language. We don't accept the fact that most of the words we use in our on-the-job writing belong almost exclusively to our own occupations and professions and that only a few belong to the common language of us all. Somehow, BLM writers think and write as though all the words they know and use are words known and used by everyone, even those in other divisions and outside of government. This isn't true, and the abtruseness of our writing shows it.

Perhaps as many as 1 word in 10 of those listed in a good desk dictionary are common to the average adult American. One authority estimates that even language experts know no more than 10 percent of the entries in an unabridged dictionary. The problem, then, is not so much to learn or teach more of the seldom-used words, but to value the more common ones, to concentrate on words most adults understand.

To make the point that a technical language is understood only by those within the profession, let's look at samples from other technicians. For example, a printer might say:

> I can't put her to bed; she pied when I picked her up.

Nothing shady here; all the printer is saying is that he couldn't put a job on the press, because when he picked up the form the type fell out.

A railroad switch crew would understand this next item, but there's no reason why you or I should:

> Run that hog into four and tie on to that cut and snake it out of there. Then shake it out. After you finish that pick up those two reefers on eight and cut them in behind the gondolas on ten. That'll wrap up the hot shot. Then tie her together and blue flag her.

You and I talk a jargon just as complicated, just as far out. Should we expect printers and yardmasters, surveyors or lawyers, journalists or doctors to understand it? No, our common base for communication with them is plain and simple English.

If we know that technical jargon clogs clear meaning and that it will be read and understood by only a few, why is it nearly everything "official" we write in government is measled with it?

And scientific prattle is as bad as technical jargon. If you'll examine BLM's writing closely, you'll see that it is often loaded with pseudo-scientific writing, a frequent partner of technical jargon. The following is a good example of faked-up scientific language, covering a simple subject:

> A basic, although often ignored conservation principle in land treatment practices is the alignment of these practices to contour operations. Contour alignment, manifested in the direction of implement travel, provides an effective and complementary attack on the forces of erosion. When soil surface disturbances run up and down hill, it is easily understood that artificial channels are formed in which run-off accumulates. As the slope of these channels increases, the velocity of the water movement accelerates, with resulting destructive energies.

Perhaps when we attempt to simulate the language of science we somehow feel we're as irrefutable, as popular, as science appears to be in the public

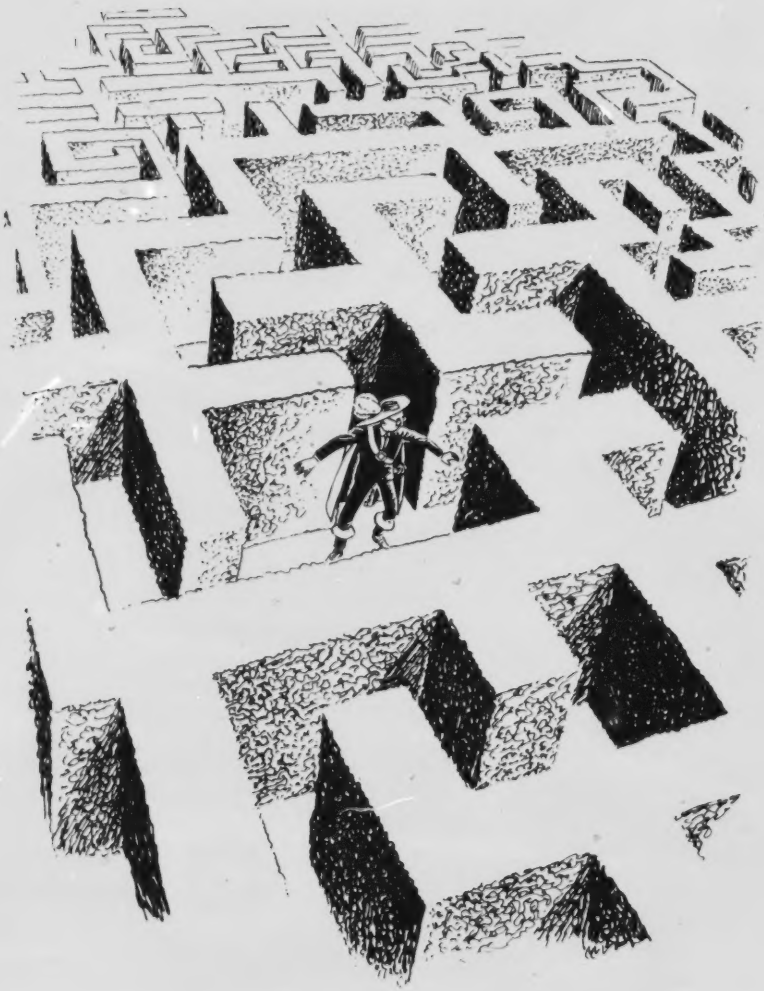
mind. Nothing could be farther from the truth, of course, but perhaps some of us government writers are living vicariously with science and, by using her language, are made to feel that we writers, too, are on the move toward the moon. At least we are out of this world part of the time.

Perhaps many of us write technical jargon because of a feeling of inferiority. We know we can't write simple, straight-forward English without a lot of effort, so we automatically fall back on our technical jargon where we feel safest; this kind of writing is easiest for us to do.

It's no secret that when we leave college, unless we're one of those rare exceptions, most of us don't know how to write simple, clear English. We were never taught it; we were never even exposed to it. That's why the dean of the University of Pittsburgh's Law School could claim that the graduates of our colleges, including the best ones, cannot write the English language; why Professor Wendell Johnson of Iowa University says he has to first teach his graduate students how to write basic English before he can get on with their education. The same is true of most college men who go into government service. They can't write simple English, simply because they were never taught. The student is often required to take courses in classic literature. He's expected to see some great inner meanings, to appreciate the poetic, the philosophical nuances in a piece of writing that is as likely to nauseate as it is to inspire. And he is confused by the conflicting dogma so common in poorly taught grammer classes. Is it any wonder, then, that most of us come away convinced we have no knack for writing or that we fall back on our technical language, where we feel more adequate?

Whether a jargon writer is motivated by fear of common English, by a passion for snobbery, or by a desire to hide his lack of preparation, or by fuzzy thinking, he's a menace to clear communications.

COMPLEXITY AND POMPOSITY – – MOSTLY COMPLEXITY



ONE thing is clear about BLM writing: It's neither clear nor simple; most of it is complex and pompous. This shouldn't upset anyone. It's an indisputable fact. And all we have to do to know it is to read critically what BLM writes normally.

But BLM is not alone with its complexity and pomposity. These same gobbledygook factors bother other government agencies, businesses, and industries every day. What, exactly, do these two, two-syllable words mean in writing?

They mean:

(1) Complex:—NOT simple . . . . knotty, tangled.

(2) Pompous:—NOT natural . . . . stilted, stuffy.

And here are a few of the terms used by experts to describe complex and pompous prose:

> . . . . falsely formalistic . . . . cluttered with officialese . . . . written to impress, not express . . . . ostentatious . . . . bookish . . . . priggish . . . . unnatural . . . . bearing complexity as the badge of wisdom . . . . stuffed with language of incredible specific gravity.

If we are complex and pompous in our writing, and we are, why are we? There are many reasons, of course—poor training in college, bad thinking habits, slavish imitation of other bad writing, wrong ideas about readers, lack of hard work, a confusion between dignity and pomposity, and a failure to understand that wisdom goes arm-in-arm with simplicity.

Professor E. A. Stauffen, who agreed that complexity and pomposity are the biggest killers of the prose cat, put his chalk on two basic errors that too many people make. They believe:

(1) That an educated man automatically learns how to write well as he works his way through college;

(2) That good writing is easy.

As for *Error No. 1*, he said:

> "To prove that 95 percent of the college graduates don't know how to write is easy. All you have to do is read them. If that doesn't prove to you they can't write, then it proves to me you can't read!"

Of *Error No. 2*, he said:

> "If you think good writing comes easy, then you either don't write, or if you do, you don't know how yet. Good writing is plain, hard, sweaty work."

As you go through our BLM writing samples, ask yourself if they sound like:

Reading made *easy* by HARD work? Or—

Reading made *hard* by EASY work?

And ask yourself this, too: Are these BLM samples clear and simple writing? Or are they complex and pompous?

But before we get into our samples, let's make a point:

Complexity and pomposity are two of the biggest fog factors we have in our writing. They kill quick and they kill dead, and they are usually found together. In fact, trying to separate complexity from pomposity is almost impossible, for in a sense, one is the other. But for our purposes, we'll look at them separately.

Complexity is primarily, but not exclusively, a mechanical failure. It results from not keeping the relationship between words, phrases, and clauses simple and logical. It usually comes about when we pack too many facts and ideas into a single sentence; when we thread together too many related objects or effects.

The following sentence from a BLM news release shows this kind of complexity at work:

> This land exchange is mutually beneficial through elimination of problems connected with the administration of scattered tracts by consolidating larger blocks of land for each agency (BLM and the State).

On the surface this sentence doesn't look too bad, but, like it or not—it reads hard—and there's no reason why it should. It's one simple sentence, 26 words, 6 hard words, several near hard words, and a writer's grade of 60.

If you break this sentence down, you'll find that what really fogs it up are its numerous polysyllabic prepositional phrases—seven in all—tacked on to and piled high after its opening independent clause. Like this:

> This land exchange is mutually beneficial . . . through . . . of . . . with . . . of . . . by . . . of . . . for . . .

And there, in this threading together of too many related objects lies the complexity. And that means gobbledygook!

How much simpler it would have been this way:

> This exchange makes it easier for both agencies (BLM and the State) to manage their own lands. In trading their hard-to-manage scattered tracts, they were able to block up their own larger holdings.

We now have 2 sentences (up from 1), 30 words (up from 26) 1 hard word (down from 6), and a writer's grade of 73 (up from 60).

Now here's another example of complexity that is caused primarily by mechanical failure. This time the fog is not so much a result of threading together related objects as of fumbling together logically unrelated objects. Once again, notice the big words; these cause complexity and show pomposity.

> Area mineral classification will be completed to provide availability of currently valuable mineral resources, as well as presently unfavorable mineral occurrences for expanding demands as these occurrences become potentially valuable.

One sentence, 30 words, 14 hard words, and a writer's grade of 43. This would be far too low—even if it made sense!

Eight different BLM'ers read this sentence three times, and not one thought it made sense. Each agreed it was all right, though stuffy, through the 14th word. But not a person could untangle the final 16.

Here's how we untangled, through context, this slough of illogical and illogically-placed modifiers:

> Mineral classifications will be made by areas; and these will show resources that are valuable now and those that might become valuable in the future.

We submitted our version to the same eight people and said, "We think this may be what the writer meant."

They agreed: "It probably is; at least it makes sense now."

However, we still wouldn't swear to what we think the writer was saying when he wrote:

> . . . . as well as (to show) presently unfavorable mineral occurrences for expanding demands as these occurrences become potentially valuable.

Maybe we can see what happened. The writer decided he needed to use "unfavorable" and "potential" to make his meaning clear and had these words running around in his head. But when he got them down on paper, he got them down wrong, in the wrong place and modifying the wrong words.

First he made "Presently unfavorable" modify "mineral occurrences for expanding demands." We simply couldn't understand what an "unfavorable mineral occurrence" was, or what "for expanding demands" meant. We finally decided that what the writer really meant to do was tie in "unfavorable" with "today's market," not with "mineral occurrences."

Second, the writer didn't mean "as these occurrences become *potentially* valuable." They're that already. What he meant was "as these *potentially* valuable occurrences" become *actually* valuable on "*the expanding market.*"

And the difference between what he meant to say and what he did say is as great as the difference between an atom and an atom bomb. That's where the complexity lies. The sentence is complex from the point of view of mechanical structure, big word use, and wrong word use.

Here's another sample of complexity at its amazing best. It was brought to us by someone who honestly didn't think it was for real. It was booked as a digest of BLM directives on JCC camps, but it is neither a digest nor a directive!

> Section 103 authorizes the Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity to: (a) enter into agreement with any Federal, State, or local agency or private organization for the establishment and operation, in rural and urban areas, of conservation camps and training centers, and for the provision of necessary facilities and services, including agreements with agencies charged with the responsibility of conserving, developing, and managing the public natural resources of the nation and with protecting the public recreational areas, whereby the Corps enrollees may be utilized by such agencies in carrying out, under the immediate supervision of such agencies, programs planned by such agencies to carry out such responsibilities.

All the things that can go into making fog this sentence has in abundance. It is one complex sentence, 95 words, 28 hard words, and a ridiculous writer's grade of 40. See what the writer forced the reader to go through if meaning was to be unscrambled. Remember: When we read a sentence, we must keep suspended in our head ALL its ideas and ALL the various shades of meaning

that modifiers give these ideas. Then when the end is reached, we must gather them together and drop them as ONE into our mind to get proper and precise meaning.

Unfortunately, the human mind—even a finely-honed and disciplined one—can handle only so many things at one time before it has to stop, assemble, and conclude. Our writer threw two main ideas at us, which was all right, but then he modified—gave different shades of meaning to these 2 ideas a total of 21 different times, in 18 prepositional phrases, 7 of which were compound, and 3 participle phrases. This is a total of 30 separate distinctions we were supposed to keep suspended in proper order before our minds assembled them into an orderly conclusion.

If the real meanness of such a sentence is not yet apparent, put it on a balance board—diagram it. Assign a weight of 1 pound to each sentence element. You'll find that you have 29 pounds on the right side of the teeter-totter and 1 pound on the left. And to add to the confusion, the 29 elements on the right side are mixed together with about as much order as a can of worms.

Nor are these all the fog factors in this sentence. One more that's serious enough to isolate is the curious batch of careless repetition that ferments around the words "such" and "agencies" and "responsibilities." This all takes place in the latter half of the sentence and there is no excuse for it.

Let's strip the last part of the sentence down to point up the gluey repetition:

> . . . (authorized to make agreements) . . . .
> . . . including agreements with agencies charged with the (conservation) responsibility . . . . whereby Corps enrollees may be utilized by such agencies in carrying out . . . under supervision of such agencies . . . the programs planned by such agencies . . . to carry out such responsibilities.

What can anyone say about such a sentence fragment as this—such variant repetition? . . . such complex structure? There's no defense of it . . . none.

What our writer meant to tell his readers in this latter-half sentence was this:

> . . . make agreements with conservation agencies . . . to supervise and use JCC enrollees . . . on projects these agencies have on public lands.

We went back through this whole sentence to see what could be done with a blue pencil. This helped some, but it was a little like getting a sick man's fever down from 114 to 110—it's still going to kill him! So we rewrote the sentence:

> Section 103 authorizes the OEO Director to:
>
> (a) make agreements with any government agency to private group to set up and operate JCC camps and training centers; and make agreements with conservation agencies to use and supervise Corps enrollees on projects these agencies have on public lands.

And that's really all he tried to say—or need to.

And now let's look at one more sample of complexity caused primarily by ridiculous repetition:

> Programing for 3 years beyond the program is required in the preparation of the Range Conservation and Development Programs and may be required for other programs for selected items of information. If the programing is needed for years subsequent to the program year, this requirement, along with the specific program elements to be programed, will be stated in the Program Advice.

In this we have two sentences, 61 words, 9 hard words, and a writer's grade of 46. Of course the thing that really makes this sentence complex and fog-filled is the insipid repetition of the word "program" nine times. This shows lack of consideration for the reader and a lack of work by the writer.

Can you imagine anybody giving directions like that to anyone on how to prepare anything? And please don't say—"But samples like these are exceptions!" They aren't! And we've been telling each other they are far too long—as we puddle through one another's gruely gobbledygook day after day.

Compare the original directive to this rewrite:

> When you prepare your RC&D program for the year, you'll have to make projections for three additional years. You may also have to do the same for certain parts of other programs. If so, we'll tell you what these are in our Program Advice.

Now it reads easily and naturally. This is because of what we call a "loose and personal style," which we'll get around to some other time. Right now we don't even want to mention being warm and friendly and human. Somehow, the thought of writing that way scares some "dignified" people half to death!

And now we come to a sample of that kind of writing in which it is impossible to draw the line between complexity and pomposity:

> The adopted measure will broaden the exchange provisions of the Taylor Grazing Act and make them a flexible, efficient, and economical instrument facilitating the consolidating and management of the public domain lands.

There's simply no sense in writing like that unless you're purposely trying to be misunderstood. See if our rewrite doesn't say the same thing simply and without the pretentious puff and pomp:

> This change in the regulations will make it easier for BLM to consolidate and manage the public lands under its care.

Here's another sample in which complexity and pomposity struggle to stay even. It's short, that's true. Which proves that some of us don't even have to work long or hard to be complex and pompous. We've done it so long it's now natural—like smoking a cigarette with our after-dinner coffee.

This sample was taken from a BLM report that had 64 pages and thousands of words, most of which carried the same credentials as our sample—complexity and pomposity. Read it and see:

> Endemic insect populations cause little-realized amounts of damage to forage and timber.

This sentence actually contains a wrong but common use of understatement, but we won't bother with that right now. What primarily concerns us

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here is stuffiness, which is pomposity, which is gobbledygook. See how the atmosphere of this short sentence is changed by rewriting it this way:

> Native insects do more damage to trees and grass than we realize.

It's true we cut down by only one little word, but there is a very big difference between the two sentences, even if we don't count the error in the original. This difference deals with tone and naturalness—atmosphere.

Which one sounds easy and natural—like a forester-friend of yours telling you what the bugs are doing to the trees and grass? And which one sounds stuffy and pompous—like a superior of yours launching into an academic lecture on the barkiverous proclivities of facinorous endemic insect populations and what the infestations of these populations are resulting in the currently available forage and timber species that are not being administered by appropriate silvicultural practices or under adequate range protective procedures?

Ridiculous? You said it! But not uncommon. In fact, the opposite—very common.

For more proof, if anybody needs it, try this actual BLM sentence on for size:

> Much of an organization's effectiveness depends upon the adequacy of the data and information with which its employees work. The multifarious overlapping planning units have produced fragmented data, oriented toward single uses of land, and as these data were used by employees organized into single use office groupings, the problem was exacerbated.

Do you like that better?

POSTURE OF POMPOSITY

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PREDICATED on the irrefragable evidence manifested in ruminating over the efficient causes of the innumerable devastating effects that were ponderously present in the multifarious exemplifications of available written communications vertically representative of the Bureau of Land Management, it is judicious and feasible to establish categorically that these BLM writings have been more banefully enervated by the omnipresence of reticulated pomposity than by any other deleterious factor that is contributory to their obfuscated yet embellished condition of utter ennui.

And that is simply a very pompous way of saying that one of the deadliest, most contagious diseases infecting BLM writing today is pomposity.

Remember we said pompous writing is writing that is NOT natural . . . is stuffy . . . stilted. And some of the other terms the experts use to describe it are . . . ornate . . . elegant . . . exquisite . . . ostentatious . . . affective not effective . . . puffed up . . . falsely dignified . . . overly formalistic . . . scared stiff of being human . . .

But we think the best way to describe pompous writing is by saying it's just plain *phony, filigreed flapdoodle.* Dictionary-defined it comes out this way:

(a) *Phony*—not genuine . . . counterfeit . . . faked
(b) *Filigreed*—fanciful . . . curlicued . . . merely decorative
(c) *Flapdoodle*—oily talk having a false look of genuineness . . . unctuous prattle.

And in that definition we have a perfect description of pompous writing.

But what causes pomposity in writing? Or, better still, what causes BLM people to get pompous when they write?

Two things mostly: (1) An error in judgment; and (2) an almost maniacal madness for using big words.

Error No. 1: When you write pompously, you judge wrongly that readers appreciate elegant writing; that they expect you as an educated person to sound elegant and impressive and will think you undignified if you don't. This may have been true years ago, when 5 percent of the people had social position and educational status and the other 95 percent had neither. But that isn't the way things are any more and readers don't like you to write like they were. In short, parading elegant words is no longer a suitable ceremony for the educated to use to IMPRESS the less educated.

Nor was this puffed up elegance appreciated in Europe even in the roughness of the fifth century when semi-Christianized barbarian hordes roamed a rude world with rock and ax. Even then, a Latinized Frankish bishop was warning his priests about pomposity:

> Be neither ornate nor flowery in your speech . . . or the educated will think you a boor and you will fail to impress the peasants.

As for Error No. 2—the maniacal madness for big words—H. W. Fowler says that those writers who run to long words are mainly the unskillful and tasteless; they confuse pomposity with dignity, flaccidity with ease, and bulk with force.

Big words are not always and necessarily bad. They are bad when the writer is obsessed with them, when he uses them for their own sake, when he uses them to the exclusion of plain words. Then they are pompous.

Of course there's one way of killing this big word bug, and that's to stop talking like a mechanical nobleman who has been stuffed to overflowing with impressive, exotic words, and start talking like the genuine, natural human being you are. It's that simple.

Another writing evil caused by big word pomposity is the evil of falling into error. The more pompous and profound we get, the more we're apt to make mistakes. This pops up in our next sample from a monthly progress report by a state fire officer:

> FIRE REPORT: Heavy rains throughout most of the State have given an optimistic outlook for lessened fire danger for the rest of the season. However, an abundance of lightning maintains a certain amount of hazard in isolated areas that have not received an excessive amount of rain. We were pleased to have been able to help Nevada with the suppression of their conflagration.

The curious thing about this stilted, stuffy, unnatural, puffed up and pompous piece is that the fire officer who wrote it is an educated, dignified, uncomplicated, easy-going, unpretentious, plain-talking fellow, who wouldn't be caught dead talking like he writes.

But what happened to him is the same thing that happens to many of us when we pick up a pencil. We become somebody else—and usually that somebody else is an aristocratic dandy of some past century. We just never really look at ourselves as we actually appear in print. If we did, we'd either quit writing or we'd quit writing like we do.

Now let's see how our fog-fighting secretary wrote the pomposity out of the fire officer's memo:

> Fire readings are down throughout most of the State. But a few rain-skipped areas are dry, and lightning is a hazard there. We are glad we could send some of our people to help Nevada put out their recent range fire.

The important point here is NOT that our secretary cut down from 60 pompous words to 42 rather simple ones; mere word-cutting is never an end in itself; but that she did make the item simple, natural, and accurate.

As for its accuracy: Our fire officer didn't mean . . . "lightning maintains a hazard in areas that have NOT received an EXCESSIVE amount of rain!" He probably meant . . . "lightning is a hazard in areas that have not received a SUFFICIENT amount of rain;" or, " . . . in areas that ARE EXCESSIVELY dry." Whatever he meant to say, he didn't say it, and he used big, elegant words not saying it.

He did not know how to handle the negative "not." This led him to pick

the wrong word in "excessive." However, even this is no real explanation, for you can't explain away a 60-word passel of pomposity by the wrong use of one "not" and one "excessive."

Pomposity isn't that simple. You can't "select it out" by changing a big word here and there; you've got to write it out by rewriting the whole thing. That's because pomposity is more than mere words; it's false tone as well.

It was this false tone that angered Franklin D. Roosevelt when he happened across it. He was convinced that the simple, personal style of writing was the most dignified style for men of importance in government and everywhere else.

Here's a pompous memo that rankled F.D.R. so much he rewrote it and shot it back to the man who pomped it up in the first place. This memo dealt with what Federal workers were to do in case of an air raid:

> Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal Government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination. Such obscuration may be obtained either by blackout construction or by termination of the illumination.

Here's how F.D.R. dignified the memo by giving it simplicity:

> Tell them that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something over the windows; and, in buildings where they can let the work stop for a while, turn out the lights.

If this kind of unpompous, simple writing means a loss of dignity, then we know a whole lot of readers who wish a lot of writers would lose a lot of "dignity" writing this way. F.D.R. did it all the time. Once, when Frances Perkins was getting a speech ready for him, she wrote this line:

> We are endeavoring to construct a more inclusive society.

That night when F.D.R. read the line on the radio, it came out this way:

> We are going to make a country in which no one is left out.

Nor did presidential simplicity go out of style with F.D.R.

President Johnson provided this in a State of the Union message. Here's a sample:

> Why did men come to this once forbidding land?
>
> They were restless, of course, and had to be moving on. But there was more than that.
>
> There was a dream—a dream of a place where a free man could build for himself and raise his children to a better life—a dream of a continent to be conquered, a world to be won, a nation to be made . . .
>
> This, then, is the state of the Union—free, restless, growing, full of hopes and dreams.
>
> So it was in the beginning.
>
> So it shall always be—while God is willing, and we are strong enough to keep the faith.

That is great writing. It couldn't be simpler or more powerful. That kind of presidential simplicity and charm make us wonder what a BLM

economist-friend of ours would say. He protested, rather bitterly, that "you can't put economics in simple language without making it cheap."

We know you can write about economics, like you can write about anything else, in a language that's simple enough to suit any audience.

We don't say you can do it easily, but we do say you can do it. And while you're doing it you'll quit worrying over that ethereal thing called "dignity," and start stewing over this solid stuff called "simplicity." You'll also learn that it's easier to be soaring and supernal than it is to be earthy and concrete. You'll learn, too, that readers will love you for the latter.

Back now to pomposity in BLM samples:

> These original land records, some of which are oriented as far back as 1800, are in a serious state of disrepair and contain many documentary inaccuracies which are detrimental to the effective and efficient determination of land and resource status.

The reaction an ordinary reader has after reading something like that is often something like this:

> Ohhhh come off it, fella! If you've got something to say, why don't you come right out and say it, then quit?

Why didn't our writer come right out and say it—maybe like this:

> Some of our land records haven't been brought up to date since 1800, and a lot of them are worn out from use. What's more, some have errors in them that keep us from getting accurate status.

Here's another sample:

> In numerous instances, the Bureau of Land Management has demonstrated the feasibility of judiciously harvesting timber on municipal watersheds and in drainage tributary to irrigation reservoirs.

Why puff up writing that way when it's so much more genuine written like this:

> BLM proves every day it can harvest timber without hurting municipal watersheds or irrigation drainages.

Or, take this pomp from a press release:

> The availability of soil survey maps from the Soil Conservation Service for about half of the burned lands was of great assistance to BLM technicians in verifying the information collected by field survey parties in the burned areas.

Why not depomp it like this:

> BLM technicians used what maps the SCS had—covering about half of the burned-over areas—to verify their field findings.

Now here's a stuffy sample from a report that makes it sound like BLM played "indulgent father" to a bunch of uneducated people-kids. See for yourself:

> This office's activities during the year were primarily continuing their primary functions of education of the people to acquaint them of their needs, problems and alternate problem solutions, in order that they can make wise decisions in planning and implementing a total program that will best meet the needs of the people, now and in the future.

As so often happens, this kind of pomposity comes from trying to make something that is ordinary and routine sound like something that is ultra-grandiose. This whole thing could have been said very simply and the writer could have maintained his dignity. Perhaps like this:

> We spent most of our time last year working with the local people, going over their problems and trying to help them figure out solutions. This way we hoped to help them set up and carry out a program that will solve today's problems and satisfy tomorrow's needs.

And then there's the kind of pomposity that comes from using what we call *persuader* words, words that are nothing more than airy symbols. They are usually used in BLM writing to "important-up" the Bureau or one of its routine jobs. These persuader words are fluff, not fact, air, not action, impressive, not expressive.

> The publication of this attractive map is an outstanding example of . . . etc.
>
> This patent was presented at impressive ceremonies held in the Bureau of Land Management State Office . . . etc.
>
> The Board will discuss all of the very difficult problems they will encounter next year . . . etc.
>
> The lease was won after several rounds of spirited bidding, which was highly competitive . . . etc.
>
> As a result, the hearings were completed in record-breaking time and with great savings to the public . . . etc.
>
> The Bureau's case was presented in practically a flawless manner . . . etc.
>
> A huge crowd attended the special installation ceremonies . . .
>
> Fire rehabilitation plans will have to be coordinated very closely with other agencies . . . etc. (You could write the rest of your natural life and not use the word very again. At least not very often!)
>
> Before BLM takes such serious steps, careful consideration is given to . . . etc.
>
> In a move denoting close cooperation between Federal and State agencies, BLM . . . etc.
>
> Mr. So and So retired after giving 33 years of faithful and dedicated serivce to the Department of the Interior . . . etc.
>
> The distinguished visitors were guests at a BLM orientation meeting this morning in the . . . etc.

And then there's the kind of pomposity that comes from trying to sound "important" when we write "talk." In many ways, this is the worst kind of pomp, for more than anything else, written talk should sound like spoken talk. If it doesn't, if it's pomped up above and beyond naturalness, kill it; then rewrite. This quote, from a BLM news release, emphasizes the point:

> Because the heavy mistletoe infestation in the Kringle Creek area has rendered the residual timber useless for timber production, the ultimate goal is to establish a healthy new stand of Douglas Fir.

That isn't anywhere near plain talk; it's plain pomposity. And it's about time somebody said so.

The mistletoe quote isn't out of the ordinary in BLM writing. Out of 100 BLM quotes we found only 1 that sounded like it might have been said by somebody who talks the way most of us do:

> We got everything lined up this morning. Now all we have to take care of is the paper work. Like always, that'll take more time than it should.

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> But we're all set to push it through as fast as we can. I think we'll be able to wrap it up sometime late next week.

That quote rings true. It sounds like somebody human said it. But it has a sad tale behind it. When the man who said it read it in the newspaper he wasn't happy. He didn't think his "natural" speech sounded "official" enough for a BLM official. He wished he could call his quote back and rewrite it. Had he been able to do so, he would have ruined it, have taken away the thing that made it good: its natural sound, its ring of truth.

This reminds us of the once beautiful woman who had her picture taken when she was pushing 50 and got mad at the photographer because he didn't make her look like she was still pushing 20. The photographer tried to explain that she was still very beautiful, with a beauty that was natural for her age. It was sad she didn't know that.

This is like our language today. It is beautiful because it is natural for our age. And no other style of any other age would fit us quite so well. And it's sad more of us don't know that. Our language, like our clothes, emerges to fit, not only the individual but the society in which he lives. Which one of us would show up for work Monday morning in a Shakespeare cape, a Napoleon cock-hat, or an Al Smith suit? We wouldn't. But that's the way we look when we get pompous in our writing.

We held the next sample until last simply because, in the ways of pomposity, it is the very best.

We'll look at only the first paragraph of this memo, which was pomped up so profoundly it sounded almost frightening in importance:

> A basic, although often ignored conservation principle in land treatment practices is the alignment of these practices to contour operations. Contour alignment, manifested in the direction of implement travel, provides an effective and complementary attack on the forces of erosion. When soil surface disturbances run up and down hill, it is easily understood that artificial channels are formed in which runoff accumulates. As the slope of these channels increases, the velocity of the water movement accelerates, with resulting destructive energies.

The pomp proceeds unswervingly for another 400 words, always making little tiny things into great big things, all the way to the very end.

For example, the 80 pompous words in this formalistic paragraph could have been informally said in these rather simple 19:

> In doing conservation work, always work on the contour if possible. That is the best way to control erosion.

This may seem like an over-simplified rewrite. If you think it is, go back and analyze the original and see EXACTLY what was said. You'll see that our rather simple 19 words were quite enough, if even they were needed.

Appropriately enough, this memo, like so many we see, called up a couplet written 250 years ago by Alexander Pope, known as the "Wasp of Twickenham," because he buzzed about puncturing pomposity wherever he found it.

> Such labored nothings is so learn'd a style
> Amaze the unlearned and make the learned smile.

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THE WEIRD WAY OF ABSTRACTION

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IF there were one hard, immutable, unalterable, inflexible, unbending, unbreakable, ex-cathedra rule for writing, which there isn't, it ought to be this: When you write, use specific and concrete words wherever you can and general and abstract ones when you have to. Or say it is this way: Make specific and concrete words carry your general-abstract ideas. All good writers write that way, simply because people read best and easiest that way.

In other words: When you have to go up into the heavens to draw a genetic image or state a universal principle, then state your principle and get down out of there as soon as you can.

Get back to earth and start proving your general-abstract point by talking about real things we all know first-hand; things we see, touch, hear, taste, smell; things that have color, size, heat, hurt, hardness; things like can-openers, pitchforks, range plows, trees, snakes, blisters, toads, rocks, clocks, trains—earthy, solid things.

In short, have respect for the abstract but stay out of it as much as possible. It's true it's easy to stay up there at a high degree of abstraction, for there you can soar and float and "write-around" in multiple-meaning words all day long. But you'll bore your readers stiff. You'll never show any reader any specific, concrete meaning—something he can take into his mind and know to be true because he has seen it first-hand at earth-level.

When you're in the abstract you're incessantly using words of many meanings, words that mean nothing specific, words that just blunder around about a meaning.

Shakespeare's Desdemona pretty well put her finger on the everythingness and the everywhereness of general-abstract words when she told Othello, in anguish and bewilderment, that she understood a fury in his words, but not the words.

And that's simply the weird way of abstraction. That's why good writers avoid it; why patient readers lose patience with it—why they wish writers would say exactly what they have to—nothing more and nothing less. Like Ben Franklin used to.

During Franklin's day a great battle raged over man's right to vote. Many of the Federalists insisted that before a man could vote, he had to own property. The Franklinites opposed this; they explained their philosophical opposition something like this:

> It cannot be adhered to with any reasonable degree of intellectual or moral certainty that the inalienable right man possesses to exercise his political preferences by employing his vote in referendums is rooted in anything other than man's own nature, and is, therefore, properly called a natural right. To hold, for instance, that this natural right can be limited externally by making its exercise dependent on a prior condition of ownership of property,

> is to wrongly suppose that man's natural right to vote is somehow more inherent in and more dependent on the property of man than it is on the nature of man. It is obvious that such belief is unreasonable, for it reverses the order of rights intended by nature.

Franklin believed this, all right, but he saw right off that that kind of abstract language wouldn't make many converts, simply because ordinary folk wouldn't wallow their way through it to get at clean meaning. So he set about pulling this concept out of the abstract and explained it something like this:

> To require property of voters leads us to this dilemma: I own a jackass; I can vote. The jackass dies; I cannot vote. Therefore, the vote represents not me but the jackass.

And Franklin's concrete words got through in a concrete way, got through when the philosophers failed with abstract distinction.

Now see how another great master of American letters wrote in specific and concrete words of the senses for his readers to see . . . hear . . . almost touch:

> The turtle's hard legs and yellow-nailed feet threshed slowly through the tall grass—not really walking but kind of hoisting and hunching his high-dome shell along.

It was this vivid, bone-hard writing that Emerson had in mind when he told us to speak what we thought in words as hard as cannon balls.

Now, see us fade into the shadowy, shifting meanings of way-out abstraction as we go BLM with this item:

> This presentation discounts the valuation fallacies commonly argued and attributed to characteristics inherent in the nature of recreation uses. Given a value indicator, estimates of consumer valuations of the experience, as well as the imputed value of the resources, are feasible.

Is there a single cannon-ball or turtle-shell word in that item? Is there even one hunching or hoisting action word? Do you see even one solitary sense-word that you can sink your teeth into? . . . get a picture of? . . . hear a sound from? . . . see a color in? . . . get a whiff of? We think not one. And that's usually how it is with abstract writing.

We'll take up the problem of how to be concrete later on; right now, however, we want to paint abstraction into a corner where we can see what it is, what it isn't, how it works, and how it's handled by BLM writers, or, more precisely, how it handles BLM writers.

First of all, the breakable rule that warns you to stay out of the abstract when you write is a common, well-known, basic rule in writing.

For example, we checked through 53 books on writing—from grade-school grammars printed in 1900 to graduate guides printed this year; each in its own way carried this warning: "Avoid general and abstract words like they were diseases;" and each concluded this commandment with, "Lay tight hold of specific and concrete words."

This "be-concrete rule" is one of the least obeyed rules in BLM writing. In fact, it isn't obeyed at all. Abstract writing in BLM is not merely an unregulated passion; it's more like an uncontrollable lust.

Let's look at a classical piece of BLM abstraction; see what it does for your practical mind that likes to see things clearly, concretely, sharply, and specifically, so it can be about its main business of making sound judgments on the word-information it has hold of. Focus your mind on this and make for yourself a sound judgment.

> The environmental effects, although extremely important, are often so subtle and so confounded with other effects we neither realize nor appreciate the true climatic effects and the resulting advantages of properly recognizing the environmental conditions.

If you judged as we did, you judged that St. Paul probably had just a writer in mind when he thundered in classical Greek:

> Except ye utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how shall it be known whereof ye speak? For ye shall speak into the air.

Or maybe Shelley was closer when he likened such words to a cloud of winged snakes.

If you'll go back and re-read the sample, you'll find there isn't one hard, specific, active, concrete sense-word in it; abstraction pure and simple it is! And abstraction like that means needless mental agony for the reader, leaving him alone with the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings.

What did the writer mean, exactly, when he said "environmental effects? . . . "other effects?" . . . "true climatic effects?" . . . "environmental conditions?" And how important is "extremely important?" How subtle is "so subtle", and how confounded is "so confounded?" What do we understand precisely when "we neither realize nor appreciate the resulting advantages of properly recognizing the environmental conditions?"

It's true there's meaning in those words, all right—plenty of it. But how can such general and abstract words yield precise meaning to average readers like you and me?

The writer no doubt knew what he wanted to say, but he just didn't take the time or make the effort to bring it down to earth, to spell it out clean and clear, to shrink it, pare it down, put it in specific, concrete words the reader could handle. If the writer doesn't do this, then the reader must do it for himself. And that means unnecessary work for him.

Vague and abstract words also carry the added danger of being misleading . . . misread . . . misinterpreted.

Professor Joseph Ryan, a management expert, said of bosses who write in the devious ways of abstraction that if they hold a supervisory position that requires them to write information for others to read, understand, and take action on, then they have a painful obligation to be exact, clear, and precise; that if they are indefinite and vague they force the reader to make a judgment

on what they probably meant to say. If he misreads the supervisor and does the wrong thing, then the bosses are to blame; he is not.

This is just another way of saying: If you can't write in the concrete, then it's safer for everyone concerned if you don't write at all. That way, nobody'll get fouled up.

Moreover, if you really understood what general and abstract words do to the reader . . . how they are full of so much meaning, contain so many indefinite notions, numbers, ideas, quantities, categories, conditions, qualities . . . how they can mean everything without ever really meaning anything . . . if you really understood this, then you'd quit using them yourself and start wishing everyone else would do the same. Whether you know it or not, you dislike abstract words as much as the next fellow, except, of course, when you're writing them. They're just too hard for your mind to handle, to get a fix on, to understand or to put into action.

When a writer bombards you with abstract words, he does to your mind what a shotgun blast does to a mirror. And looking for exact meaning in these general-abstract words is like looking for your face in the shotgun-shattered mirror. Your face is there all right—in whole, halves, hunks, parts, particles, and pieces—just like a writer's exact meaning is in his general-abstract words.

But even after a short time of this painful searching, any reader gets tired of looking for and piecing together meaning. He finds so little for so much looking, and he's never quite sure of the meaning he does get. He gets tired; he gets bored; he gets angry; he quits.

Watch how these BLM abstract words spread out, flood over, and crumble away the images in your mind, sloshing away every bit of clear meaning you might be getting—like the sea does the sandcastles of kids:

> Important topographic details will be taken from the best available sources and shown on diagrams. These diagrams will introduce the concept that for all purposes short of actual conveyance, the locus of technically unsurveyed areas can be defined by the representation of the protraction plats and described in terms of the rectangular system.

Where is your sand-castle of meaning now? Do you really see it—or is it like so many pebbles shifting around somewhere under shallow water?

The obvious question to ask in the face of such language is: "Can a person who writes that way really expect to get into another man's mind with his words? . . . . and there be understood? . . . . and perhaps be invited back?"

The answer is simple: "Nobody who writes that way can honestly expect any of these things." If he does, his judgment of the reader is no better than his manners with words.

Abstract writers apparently do not realize what they do to the reader's mind: How their indefinite words spread and multiply meanings so far and wide . . . . how the reader's imagination has to multiply images at more

frames a second than a movie camera to keep up with the ever-spreading meanings.

And when the reader is through "tracking" these abstract words, he has to sift through the multiplied meanings, sort out the myriads of mental images, and then try to match up those that seem to belong together.

Now you can see how dangerous it is if a writer gets general and abstract in an information or instruction memo the reader is supposed to understand and take action on—but can't until he sifts and sorts and matches and tries all the various combinations and possible combinations of meanings that the abstract words produced in his mind.

This is precisely the thing that happened here recently when this instruction memo came in:

> In order to evaluate existing recreation site appurtenances and facilities and to include applicable facilities such as tables, fireplaces, etc. . . . it is requested that prints of all appurtenances and facilities be forwarded to this office as soon as practicable.

And that is one grandiose abstraction—so inclusive of so many meanings and so full of so many possible meanings, it fails utterly to give any one specific meaning a reader could go to work on and make a judgment for action.

Now, mind you, we don't say this memo wasn't answered; it probably was. But if it was, it wasn't because of what the memo actually said—it was because those who got the memo guessed at what it meant to say.

This memo was read by 12 of us; it was passed around, studied, and discussed. All 12 agreed that the memo didn't really say anything. Three reviewers, a district manager, an economist, and a river basin chief, said they thought they knew what the memo meant, but added, "But we had to guess at it; it doesn't say what we think it wanted to."

The trouble, of course, floats around the meaning of the four abstract terms—*appurtenances*, *facilities*, and *applicable facilities*. The three who guessed at what the memo meant said they thought the four words all meant the same thing, "like chairs and fireplaces." Some thought that maybe all four of the words did mean the same thing, but they asked, "How is the reader supposed to know what they mean unless he knew before the memo was written?"

Which isn't saying much for the memo or why it was written at all.

Others denied flatly that the four words all stood for the same thing—"at least not to us." The referents and references the words called up in their minds just didn't seem to fit the "all-the-same-thing" meaning in the memo.

Three thought appurtenances was a legal term—as the dictionary says it can be—having to do with "access and rights-of-way." Two or three others thought appurtenances meant something "auxiliary"—as the dictionary also

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says it can—something apart from but adding to the value of the recreation site. Maybe a nearby stream or forest. But appurtenances aren't the same thing as facilities or applicable facilities, which seem to mean the same things.

And on and on the 12 went, from definitions to subdefinitions, from referents to references and back again, from meanings to possible meanings, from images to more images, from denotations to connotations, and around and back—ever guessing.

That's the misleading, meandering way with needlessly abstract writing, a tortuous and dangerous way that fills the reader's mind with countless images, multiple meanings, copious confusion, and, to borrow a popular BLM "leech-word" abstraction, with maximum available alternatives.

And that brings us to a look at the most inexcusable form of abstraction in all BLM writing: Leech-Words. We call them that for the simple reason that these fat and slippery words worm their way into about everything that's written in BLM; they burrow in their heads and tails and suck BLM writing dry of any life-blood it might have had to start with. They seem to have their psychological roots in the too-human habit we have of imitating each other, even to the point of using words that don't mean anything as though they meant something important.

At one time BLM's leech-words probably had specific and concrete meaning, but these words have been so misused, overused, and just plain abused, they don't mean much of anything any more. Even writers who need to use them for specific meaning no longer can, simply because they don't mean what they used to, if, indeed, they mean anything anymore. Today these meaningless leech-words just hang, sick-like, on BLM writing.

How long has it been, for example, since you picked up anything official without running into such words as . . . . available, or availability of? . . . . feasible, or feasibility of? . . . . existing? . . . . effectiveness or efficiency of? . . . . minimizing or maximizing? . . . . implementing or expediting? . . . . utilizing or utilization of? . . . . adequate or adequately suited to? . . . . exhaustive? . . . . relevant or pertinent to? . . . . principles of? . . . conservation techniques? . . . . optimum results of? . . . . justifications or data? . . . . alternatives? . . . . primary functions or objectives? . . . . actuating or effectuating?. . . . and on and on, into the wordosphere.

There are only two reasons why these leech-words are so popular in BLM: They're a lazy habit, and they can mean anything the writer wants them to . . . . stand for any idea . . . . modify any word or group of words.

Take the universal leech-word "available," probably the most popular one at the present time in the Bureau; we've found it in such combinations as: available public lands . . . . available forage species . . . . available timber stands . . . available small tracts . . . . available access . . . . available stock water . . . . available warehouse space . . . . available office space . . . . available data . . . . available trespass evidence . . . . available recreation facili-

ties . . . . available transportation facilities . . . . available funds . . . . available . . . . available . . . . available!

And if the leech-word *available* wasn't available, then the equally available, multi-meaning leech-words *existing, suitable,* or *adequate* were effectively utilized, with optimum justification and without minimizing or jeopardizing any of the feasible alternatives or primary objectives that were an essential part of and basic to the implementation and effectuation of the fundamentally sound conservation and management programs, which were premised on the relative effectiveness of the findings of exhaustive studies of all available data assembled by adequately trained and professionally competent technicians.

Pretty ridiculous, isn't it? So much so that some word-harps make careers out of criticizing it.

No wonder readers of such inspired writing get the idea that the actual author of such stuff wasn't a real, live human being at all, but a great mystic force known only as "the Government." Some of us seem to forget how universally bad our writing is held up to be, how often newspapers poke editorial sticks at it, how frequently funnymen bring down the house with built-in jokes about it, how people in general ridicule it and laugh at it!

It ain't funny. But that's the way it is, and if we don't see it the way other people see it, then maybe we ought to start reading it the way other people read it—like we were on the outside reading in.

Another weird way with abstract writing: It's the discourteous way and readers don't like it, whether they're inside BLM or outside it. When you write to a person and you're needlessly abstract and vague, you tell him flat out that you didn't give him a thought or a flicker of consideration, either before you started writing, or while you were about it. When he reads you, he knows this, just like he'd know if you were rude to his face, and rudeness hurts, however it comes.

Every reader feels about and reacts to what he reads; he has to; it's natural; he's human. And every reader uses what he reads and how it is written to make a judgment, usually subconscious, on how much the writer probably knows and what kind of person he probably is. If a writer doesn't know that his knowledge and manners bare themselves to his reader, then he doesn't understand either readers or writing.

For example: How would you judge the BLM writer who wrote the following item? Do you think he's a sensitive fellow? Do you think he worked hard to see what he had in his own mind before he tried pressing it into yours? Did he honestly try to make reading easy for you?

> They pointed out that because of the fluidity in the terminology of the designation system and the uncertainties of forthcoming Departmental regulations, it was recommended that their presentation with respect to designation be built around multiple use, public sale, and public land law review legislation.

Did the writer really think about any reader when he wrote that? You don't have to be clairvoyant to know he didn't. If everyone who wrote would put himself in his reader's shoes, at least for a time, then we'd all write a little better and walk a little easier. *Becoming the reader is the essence of becoming a writer.*

This is just another way of spelling out a most important rule in all writing: When you write, write NOT to everybody, but to SOMEBODY.

Writing that is needlessly abstract is also staggeringly expensive. Few who write have any real notion of these costs. The few who do can't believe the figures. They're simply too high.

The high cost of abstraction comes not in getting the words *written;* for most abstract writers usually write easily and quickly, and therefore cheaply. The cost comes in getting those abstract words read, understood, interpreted. passed on, and translated into action.

Abstract writing might look like it's the same thing as complex and/or pompous writing. It isn't. All toupees look something alike because they've all got glued-in hairs; complexity and pomposity and abstraction look something alike because their glued-in hairs are big words.

We said before: The biggest cause of complexity is mechanical failure—we overload our ideas, overpack our sentences, and overwhelm our readers.

We also said before: The biggest cause of pomposity is a mistake in judgment—we mistake pomposity for dignity, and we underestimate our reader's education and overestimate our own.

We say now: The biggest cause of abstract writing is out-and-out laziness—we're too lazy to clear up our own thinking and too lazy to dig out the exact words the reader needs to read-think clearly.

Professors Tenney and Wardle list such causes as . . . the writer not knowing the subject he's writing about . . . not knowing the fundamentals of good writing . . . not considering his reader. But they also say that laziness is the basic cause.

A good many BLM readers are indignant over the complex-pompous-abstract writing that pounds them to pieces day after day. Critics inside BLM ticked off numerous causes for abstract writing—all of which came under one heading: FEAR of some sort. Here they are:

(1) FEAR of leaving something important out—so we use abstract terms that include everything important and unimportant in . . . .

(2) FEAR of having somebody know something we don't think they "have a right to know just yet"—so we write in terms so abstract nobody can know anything for sure . . . .

(3) FEAR of making a clear-cut recommendation that might be reversed—so we make an abstract recommendation that is simultaneously reversible and irreversible . . . .

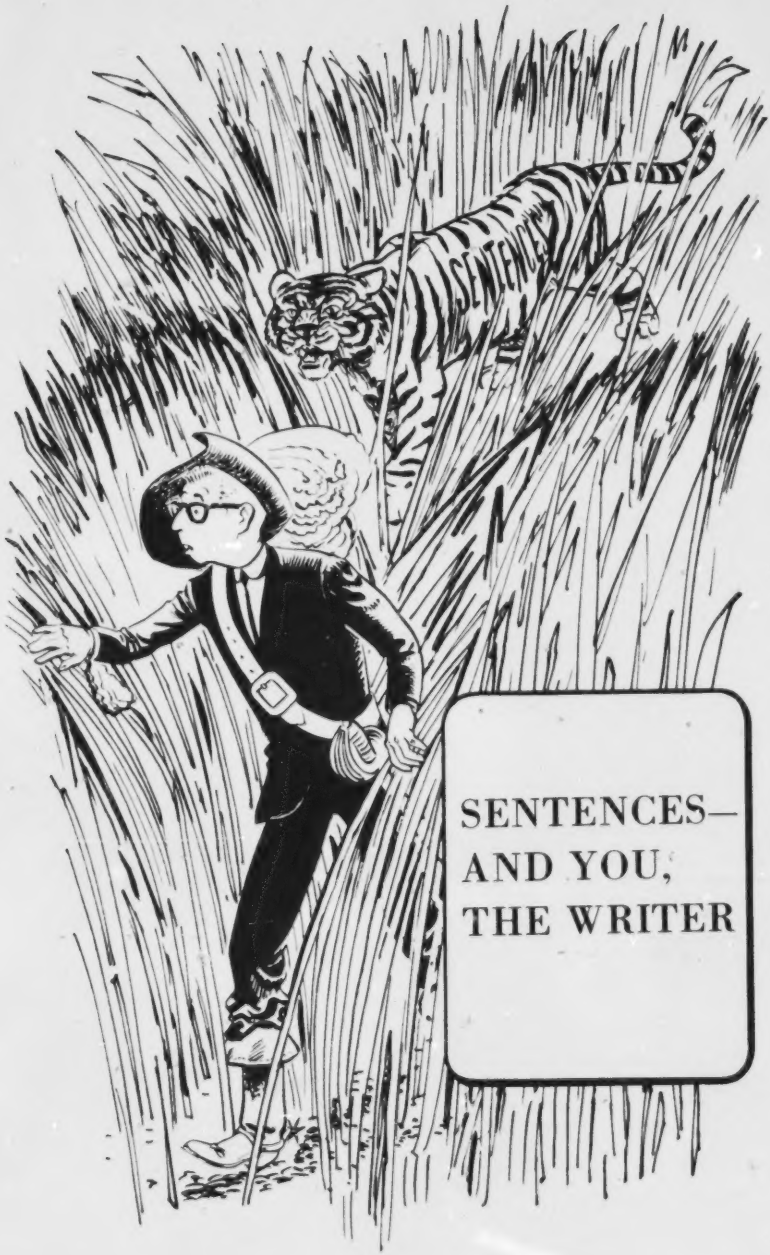
(4) FEAR of taking an unequivocal stand—so we take an abstract stand that is equivocal and unequivocal at the same time . . . .

(5) FEAR of not writing about *something*, even when we really have nothing to write about, of not contributing our word-share to keep the paper flowing . . . .

(6) FEAR of not sounding like everybody else important sounds.

Are these hard sayings? We think they are. Are they true sayings? We're certain of it. We hear them repeated every day; we read stuff born of these fears all the time; we know people who write out of such fears; we've done it ourselves. And the shame is ours.

But these are no excuses. Writing is too basic and essential to BLM's idea-making and idea-exchanging; too vital to the Bureau's plans, programs, and operations—in the office and on the ground; too tied in with the public interest and the common good; too symbolic of the Bureau's internal and external human and public relations; too confoundedly expensive—too all of these things and many more, to be treated like it comes cheap or is cheap.



SENTENCES— AND YOU, THE WRITER

WHETHER we like it or not—and most of us don't—writing good sentences is a sweaty, complicated business that takes concentration, patience, and practice. The nature of the sentence is enough to account for the hardness of the job. There are many different kinds of sentences; there are many different parts to each sentence; there are many different patterns and forms they can take; and there are many different principles they must follow. Sentence writing is no off-the-top-of-the-skull business.

Most of us, however, would like to think that turning our thoughts into sentences is nothing more than a rather dreary job of stringing words together, one after the other, as they tumble from our minds, paying little or no attention to word-order, meaning, form or structure. Though a good many of us write sentences that way, that isn't the way sentences ought to be written. They deserve better, for they are, after all, "our minds made visible."

Professor E. A. Stauffen said that writing good sentences is a tedious business that requires feeling, knowledge, technique, patience, and discipline. For each sentence you write is a mingling of grammar, syntax, form, semasiology, rhetoric, tone, rhythm, and style. And unless you are able to mingle these ingredients in just the right amounts, your sentence may not mean what you want it to; it may mean what you don't want it to, or it may mean nothing at all.

Here's a sentence, for example, that doesn't clearly say what the writer meant it to:

> As we interpret instruction Memo X, whenever possible, plowing should be done on the contour.

Did the writer mean: "As we interpret Instruction Memo X, whenever possible . . . .?" Or did he mean: ". . . . whenever possible, plowing should be done on the contour?" The way the "whenever possible" squints both ways in the sentence, it could modify either the words that come before or those that follow.

Here's another sentence that doesn't quite say what the writer meant it to. Even though the reader no doubt got the intended meaning, he had to get it on his own by correcting the sentence in his mind as he read.

> To accept your recommedations on the project, further studies will have to be completed.

How can "further studies" accept recommendations? They can't of course, but because of the way the writer built his sentence, they seem to. What the writer probably meant to say, with personal pronouns added for interest:

> Before we can accept your recommendations on this project you will have to make further studies.

No writer has the right to feel that because a reader is able to figure

out the right meaning from a weak sentence, the sentence is therefore strong. Sentences have to be more exact than that; they have to be built so the reader can not only understand them but also can't misunderstand them.

This sentence says the opposite of what the writer meant it to:

> The expansion of this program would never have been accomplished unless the district manager and his staff *had not* carefully planned for it.

What the writer meant to say was that "the expansion of the program would never have taken place unless the district manager and his staff HAD carefully planned for it."

You might mark that sentence well because of its negatives, for no words in a sentence are harder to handle for sense than negatives. Whenever one appears, it reverses the flow of thought, and when two or three appear, the writer himself is apt to get lost.

And watch this next one lose himself in a different way:

> One area of several hundred acres above Ransom Creek is now cleared of timber by a fire that felled a timbered and vast forest that stood there in 1920. Most of the Aesop Mountains and its (sic) neighboring ranges have recovered almost unbelievably. Many early photographs taken in the 1890's in the surrounding country are almost impossible to locate now because of the dense timber.

If you got the right meaning the first time through, you're a mental giant of sorts. We got the strange notion—probably because that's what the sentence said—that photographs taken in the 1890's somehow got lost in the dense timber and were now impossible to locate.

What the sentence meant was, "The timber is so dense in that area today that it's hard to tell it's the same area just by looking at photographs taken there in the more barren days of the 1890's."

The only reason we know that's what the writer meant to say is because he told us so in person later.

There is a third kind of sentence, one in which the writer seems to say nothing!

> Each Bureau functional program operates within a dynamic and complex decision-making framework of formal and informal authorizations and restraints, which is constantly changing; this framework evolves from the operation of an interaction between a multitude of diverse and often conflicting factors, some of which are concrete and easily defined and others extremely nebulous.

This sentence must mean something! It looks and sounds really important, and it has fairly adequate grammar. But we've tried translating it into simple English and we've had others try. The results: Nothing doing!

Nor does it take a long and complex sentence to say nothing:

> There are several kinds of value terms, including value of sales or output, value added, and income. Sometimes the ones used will be governed by availability.

It's little wonder that the BLM'er who sent these sentences said:

They don't need defogging; they need destroying!

These samples showing wrong, opposite, or empty meaning are by way of introducing the real question: What makes a weak sentence weak?

Before we can answer we have to decide what a sentence is. Learning—or, rather, being told—that a sentence has not yet been adequately defined comes as quite a shock to a good many of us. For years now we've been certain that we had learned in grade school, in high school and in college, dozens of times over, the definition of a sentence:

> A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought and having a subject and predicate, either expressed or implied.

While it's true this conventional definition is popular, it is equally true there are as many exceptions to it as there are variations of it.

Despite its inadequacy, it seems to have stuck with most or us, and a good many of us simply won't admit it isn't binding—probably because we had to learn it so well, so often, and so painfully. But modern scholars say we haven't yet learned enough about how our language or its grammar actually works to define a sentence in the "absolute sense," or, for that matter, even enough to define the parts of speech "absolutely.'

In one way this makes using the language easier than it was a few years ago: if you make what used to be called a "glaring grammatical error," you probably do so with the sympathy of numerous scholars, who say you are probably as right in your usage today as the conventional grammars were probably wrong in theirs yesterday. This means we can now be about our writing without constantly looking over our shoulders to see if the goddess of grammar is smiling or scowling.

This does not mean that each of us is his own best grammar book. There is still what is called good English, appropriate usage, intelligible syntax, acceptable form, and conventional respectability, all of which are based on revolutionary research into the language and on the tenor of the times. And all are rooted in the doctrine of usage. This doctrine says: "What the majority of the people accept as good usage today is, therefore, good usage today—although it might not have been good usage yesterday."

It is sometimes painful to be told that much of the rhetoric and a good deal of the grammar we studied in school 15 or 30 years ago are today deflated notions, discarded rules, or suspect concepts. Nevertheless, it's a fact that today there's a "new English," just as surely as there's a "new math." And tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that, it will be newer yet—and yet it will still be "good English."

These changing speechhabits have changed more in the past few decades than they did in the previous three and a half centuries, which was about the time all of this dogmatic business about Latin-based "correct grammar" was starting.

As a result of all of these changes, the definition of a sentence, as that of the parts of speech, has gone from the "this-is-absolutely-it" to the "we're-not-sure-yet" stage. Modern scholars admit that they aren't even certain whether a sentence is based on structure, sound, or meaning, or a combination thereof. They're just not sure, so we'll stick to the conventional definition of a sentence for three reasons: (1) It is a working definition that fits our needs; (2) most of us know and accept it; and (3) most of us also know, at least somewhere in the back of our minds, the various kinds of conventional sentences there are and the several parts of speech and order of syntax that go to make them up. We have to know at least that much about our sentences if we are to learn to control and fashion them.

Before we set off exploring conventional sentences and seeing how they work, we should identify and appreciate the single most important factor behind every sentence . . . the most important factor contained in every sentence . . . the most important factor showing through every sentence. *That most important factor is YOU, the writer.* Neither enough nor too much can be said about you, the writer, for no other sentence-factor can touch you in importance; all others are picayune by comparison. What ever your sentence is, it *is* because of you; you made it that way; it is uniquely you, and, at the same time, it is uniquely yours; it is a moving picture of your mind and your personality at work.

Goethe said that in every man's writing the character of the man must lie recorded. This writing sentences, then, should be a source of pride in a man, for where else, in what other kind of work or profession can he see his own mind re-created so swifty, so surely, so accurately, as in his writing?

Yet a good many of us approach writing as something dull and unworthy of much attention. Is it that most of us don't care about what we write? Research psychologists say "no." It is, rather, they say, that too many of us are subconsciously afraid of how we might look on paper. They say, too, there are reasons for our fear. From grade school on we were taught, at least by implication, that writing is for the gifted few. So the rest of us had just better forget the whole bit and bumble along doing our inefficient best. As a result of this environment a good many of us quit trying to write well at all—even though we have to be classed as "professional writers," since we get paid for writing—whether it's memos, letters, reports, or news releases—it's for pay.

This "writing-can't-be-learned" business is a lot of nonsense, which, as Dr. Wendell Johnson says, is usually taught by grammar teachers who don't know what they should teach about writing—and which is spread around by people who have to write but are too incurious to learn how.

Fear does play an important role in causing much of the weakness in government writing. But it's a different kind of fear from the subconscious fear of how we might look on paper; in government writing it's a conscious fear—the fear of not sounding like everyone else, the fear we have of just being our natural selves. This fear that causes us to abandon ourselves and to imitate

others not only kills our own writing; it also adds to the totality of the "sameness-sickness" that afflicts government writing in general.

This matter of being frankly yourself in writing is not a question of being proud or egocentric; it's simply a matter of realizing you can't try to sound like somebody or everybody else and still ring true. Despite pleas from experts, however, most of us seem afraid not to go on imitating that style of writing which is universally lamented as "governmentese" or "official federal prose." We go on imitating our superiors who imitate their superiors, who in turn are imitating . . . . and on and on. In the end, as William Whyte points out, everything comes out sounding like it was all written by the same government employee, a career man who might have once taken an accelerated course in Victorian English, with special emphasis on 1850 grammar and sentence structure.

Perhaps there is a certain psychological status symbol connected with our imitating our superiors in this matter of writing; in a way this sort of makes all of us members of the "superior set." But when we give up just being our own natural selves, we give up everything; we go hollow; we lose our touch, and our sentences turn tin.

Perhaps, then it's little wonder that neither enough nor too much can be said about YOU, the writer . . . and about how your mind shows through your sentences.

SEVERAL STRONG REASON SENTENCES ARE WEAK

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THERE'S one general principle that governs all English writing, making it good or bad, weak or strong. Of all the words in a sentence the verb—the action word—is by far the most important. The verb is the power-plant in your sentence; it supplies energy, vitality, and motion. Without a strong verb to juice up a sentence and make it come alive and move along, it dries out and dies.

Using a weak verb, a dead linking verb, or a lifeless passive to express action is like putting a washing machine motor in a Cadillac. You may eventually get where you're going but who would want to ride with you? That's the way a reader feels when you force him to hack his way through a jungle of sentences thick with tangled passives and under-storied with scrubby verbs, woody links, and strangling modifications.

Every idea has some action in it. The good writer finds this action and expresses it in vigorous verbs.

Let's get down to the basic reasons why Federal prose sentences are so often weak, ineffective, dull, and at times downright insipid. Heading the list is the habit most of us have of writing almost exclusively in the passive voice. English verbs can be either in the active or the passive voice. In the active, the subject of the sentence is acting, is doing something. In the passive, the subject is being acted upon, is having something done to it, is receiving the action. This passive action is usually bounced back up front from the tail end of the sentence, giving the sentence a stationary, rocking-horse motion, rather than a lively, get-up-and-go, let's-keep-it-moving action.

The passive voice is the weakest part of our language. It is formed by using any form of the verb "to be" with the past participle.

Samples:

Active: Raymond shot the moose.
Passive: The moose *was shot* by Raymond.
Active: The horse kicked the boy.
Passive: The boy *was kicked* by the horse.

Note how, when we switch from the active to the passive voice in the following sentences, extra words always have to be added to complete the meaning of the sentence. Also note how the true subject of the sentence becomes less personal or even disappears and how the motion in the sentence grinds to a halt.

Active: The district manager called a staff meeting. (7 words)
Passive: A staff meeting *was called* by the district manager. (9 words)
Active: The State director presented a "whittling board" to the Governor yesterday. (11 words)
Passive: A "whittling board" *was presented* yesterday to the Governor by the State director. (13 words)

Active: Yesterday the Washington office gave the district office enough money to complete its proposed range study. (16 words)

Passive: Yesterday the district office *was granted* sufficient funds by the Washington office to complete its proposed range study. (18 words)

Active: The International Mustang Club yesterday recommended that a wild horse range be established near Dover. (15 words)

Passive: The establishment of a wild horse range near Dover *was recommended* yesterday by The International Mustang Club. (17 words)

Active: This report contains the Advisory Board's recommendations. (7 words)

Passive: The recommendations that *were made* by the Advisory Board yesterday are contained in this report. (15 words)

Many government and business writers get into a rut of using the passive because so much of the official and technical material they read is written in the passive. It's true that the passive has a place, often a very important place, in your writing. But it's equally true that when it's overloaded with passives, as much government writing is, the reader just won't stay with you. And why should he? The human eye can stay focused in one place just so long in its search for meaning; then it has to move along. So if your sentences don't have enough life and vigor to move themselves along, the reader abandons them.

Prof. C. Merton Babcock says that overuse of the passive voice is a wasteful practice in writing. The writer wastes time preparing it, and the reader wastes time trying to decipher its "static" quo.

Despite the weakness of the passive voice, it does come in handy from time to time, and it can be used to great advantage if the writer learns how to handle it sensibly for special effect. At times there are perfectly good reasons for using the passive, but at no time is there any excuse for a writer to plunge into the passive and forget to come out.

Out of 100 pieces of BLM writing checked in 1 study—letters, memos (especially memos), news releases and reports, more than 75 percent of the constructions were in the passive voice, and a good many of the samples failed to yield even 1 active verb. Reading them was like swallowing dust.

The general principle to follow is this: Use the passive voice when the person or thing receiving the action is more important than the person or thing doing the action, and when the person or thing doing the action is unknown or unimportant.

For example, it would be better to use the active verb in such a sentence as this: "The State director personally directed the mop-up operation."

On the other hand, it would be better to use the passive in this sentence: "The State director was bitten by a ground squirrel." This is better than sticking to the active voice and saying, "A ground squirrel bit the State director." Here the passive actually is stronger, for the State director is a more important subject than either the squirrel or his bite.

Another reason for preferring the passive is to achieve a slow, unemphatic style. In general, then, use the passive only when you have to; otherwise, stay in the active, for it's there you get sentence motion, vigor, readability, reader interest and clarity.

One more weakness in BLM sentences is the smothered verb. There are many ways of smothering verbs, and we use them every way we know. We bury our verbs so deeply they seem to disappear like a mouse in a straw-stack. To be sure, we get the ripples of a strong verb in most of our sentences, but if we want to find the strong verb we have to dive long and deep for it and then mentally rewrite the sentence if we are to get the meaning.

Readers have an intense, though usually subconscious, dislike for smothered verbs. Readers want quick action, and the quickest way to deprive them of it is to bury the verb under a mass of pompous, abstract and technical words. Jacques Maritain wrote that the heaviness of language blunts the mind's power to perceive its significance.

The easiest and probably the sneakiest way to bury a strong verb is to turn it into a noun and use it as the subject of the sentence. It's important to note that when a worthy verb is turned into an abstract noun, the main verb finally settled on usually turns out to be some form of "to be," whose meaning, to be completed, usually has to be turned into a heavily modified passive construction. When a strong verb is turned into a noun, the true subject of the sentence is lost altogether, or is so badly submerged it might as well be lost.

See how the writer has turned his verbs into nouns in the following sentences, thereby losing the action of a strong verb and losing sight of the true subject and its proper predicate. Also notice that when the sentence is reversed and turned into the active voice, a personal or living subject appears, and its predicate (verb) gathers strength.

Original: *Revisions* have been made in the state safety program for the purpose of improving safety procedures. (16 words)

Rewrite: We *revised* our safety program to improve our safety procedures. (10 words)

Original: The *completion* of Report X should be accomplished so that it arrives at this office no later than January 20. (20 words)

Rewrite: You must *complete* Report X and submit it to this office by January 20. (14 words)

Original: Better *distribution* of the case load affected a marked *improvement* in the operation of the Land Office. (17 words)

Rewrite: The Land Office *redistributed* its case load and *improved* its operation. (11 words)

Original: *Prevention* of pollution and down-stream silting is a *must* for logging operators. (13 words)

Rewrite: Logging operators must *prevent* pollution and down-stream silting. (9 words)

Original: *Protection* of spawning grounds for anadromous fish is a major project for BLM. (13 words)

Rewrite: One of BLM's major projects is *to protect* spawning grounds for anadromous fish. (13 words)

This smothering our active verb by turning it into a lifeless abstract noun is the lazy, long-way-around way to write, for you don't have to be specific or emphatic, or even grammatical. It's easier on the writer, but it's hard on the reader. He's the poor soul who has to scratch and dig to figure out your grammar and your sentence structure and to riddle out your meaning.

The second most popular way of burying the verb and fuzzing up the sentence is this: When we have an idea that contains action, and most ideas do, we smother the true action by using tired, inactive verbs that do little more than show weak relationship; usually, these effete verbs require extensive modification if meaning is to push its way through. Sometimes the verbs we use are so weak and the modification so heavy that confusion and complexity reign all alone:

> It may be concluded that multivalued decision problems are so common in economics that the objectives and criteria of conservation decisions are best formulated in a way that takes uncertainty explicitly into account; this can be done, for example, by subjecting the economic optimum to the restriction of avoiding immoderate possible losses, or by formulating it as minimizing maximum possible losses.

There isn't a strong verb in the whole 61 words, and it wouldn't help much if there were, for you probably couldn't find it, smothered as it would surely be. The sentence is literally loaded with weak passives, off-shoot prepositional phrases, and complicated modifiers.

Let's work with a few simpler samples that show the weak verb going about its dirty work:

> Improvement in the field of pest control *was accomplished* by the *utilization* of more efficient insecticides.

This is indeed a sick sentence; it is in the passive voice; it has turned the real verb, "to improve" into an abstract noun, and it uses a weak, passive verb to express the real action inherent in the sentence. Our writer might have pushed the sentence into the active voice by using a strong verb to give it identity and movement:

> Better insecticides *have improved* our pest control programs.

Here's another example of weak verbs in action, or, rather, in inaction:

> This section of the report *enunciates* the basic principles and values the Bureau *deems* indispensable in guiding the accomplishment of its various programs.

The sentence is motionless and wearying, since its verbs—"enunciates . . . . deems"—are too weak even to suggest action. What's more, the two weak verbs are surrounded by a collection of abstract words that smothers any active meaning the sentence might have had.

Here weak verbs are buried deep under abstract nouns, prepositional phrases, and near-dead modifiers:

> Although potential production is chiefly a physical limits concept, economic and social factors are to be considered to some extent to keep estimates to within a liberally defined realm of practicability.

That anagrammatical hodge-podge of words is supposed to be getting verbal go-power from one dead "is" and one "are." It's little wonder that such sentences die when they hit paper!

The third way of burying verbs is to take a weak verb and weave modifiers in and around it until the action verb in the sentence is completely tangled and strangled:

> As a result of the mineral examiner's report, the contention of the claimant *was adversely affected in a very serious manner.*

The verb in this sentence—the power-plant that should energize the whole sentence—is the small-voltage verb "was," a verb so weak it's almost helpless. Where's the power-plant in this sentence?

> The first part of the Advisory Board meeting *was hurried through very quickly* in order that the specific reports on sage-brush spraying could be discussed in a more complete manner.

Again it's the weak little "was," and again it's smothered by numerous non-essential modifiers.

The fourth way we bury verbs is to reject a strong verb and use instead some linking verb—*am, are, is, was, were, been, be, taste, look, feel, appear, become,* and scores of others. Their only function in a sentence is to sit there and link the subject with its predicate noun or adjective. These predicate nouns and adjectives are called complements because they complete the meaning of the subject.

Here are a few simple examples, with the linking verb and its complement underlined:

(1) The field men *were tired.* (predicate adjective)
(2) The horse *is an Arabian.* (predicate noun)
(3) I *feel bad* (*not badly*). (predicative adjective)
(4) She *appears sick.* (predicate adjective)
(5) The book is "*Forever Amber.*" (predicate noun)
(6) They *look pooped.* (predicate adjective)

Overuse of the linking verb, since it can't show motion, lulls the reader and dulls him, too. Some experts say it heads the list for causing dullness. Be that as it may, the linking verb gets really sickly when it is used to join two complicated noun clauses:

> The most fundamental weakness in our organizational set-up at the present time is that we must spend too much time traveling to and from our work area.

That sentence has action born into it, but the author killed it when he condensed all the action into the limping linking verb "is."

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Here's another:

> Following the Program Advice in preparing for our annual work program *is* a time-consuming but necessary procedure.

Sentences such as this caused Marjorie True Gregg to advise us to cut out the noun constructions that are clogging and clotting and curdling our sentences.

Another tip on how not to write weak sentences deals with the submerged or false subject. Linguist Margaret Schlauch describes the false subject problem by saying that there is often a conflict betwen the formal subject of a sentence, which is given grammatical prominence, and the psychological subject, which is really the center of the writer's attention.

The problem, then, is for the author to make his grammatical subject and his psychological subject one and the same. Otherwise, a false subject has to be manufactured.

Almost any word can function as the grammatical subject, yet such a subject may or may not be the true subject, and it may not be the person or thing doing the action. This is especially true when the main verb in a sentence is turned into a noun and used as the subject of the sentence. Remember that if you have a false subject in a sentence, you'll have a false verb, too.

When the false subject appears, the reader is seduced into believing that the grammatical subject is really what the sentence is all about. Moreover, spotting the false subject is not always easy, for the reader must work back from the action, action that may be, but probably isn't, expressed in the predicate verb. Another fact about false subjects is that they are usually blood-brothers to the passive voice and the smothered verb. They live in clusters, these three.

What, for instance, is the true subject and verb here:

> A successful installation of new billing techniques was accomplished in the Land Office.

Grammatically the true subject is easy to spot: "A successful installation." But is that the true subject—the thing actually doing the action? The only way we can find out is by going to the verb, "was accomplished." And that verb has about as much "action" as a day-old highball. So we can ignore it for the time being. After studying the sentence, we find that the real action in the sentence is "installed," which has been converted from a verb into a noun and now occupies the position of the subject.

Next we ask if "installation" is the real action verb, what person or thing was installed? The answer is "new billing techniques." Now we have the true subject and the true predicate, and the sentence should read something like this: "New billing techniques were installed in the Land Office." Or, if we want to take the Land Office as the true subject, we can pull our sentence out of the passive and put it into the active like this: "The Land Office in-

stalled new billing techniques." This is much better, for now we have a personal subject doing something active.

Let's see if we can spot a false subject:

> Good progress is being accomplished on the recreation inventory.

When we examine the sentence we find once again that the real action is in the false subject, *progress*. If progress is being made, who is making it? The answer is that a human is involved. But our author has failed to include anybody, so we'll supply the true subject: "We are making good progress on the recreation inventory." That's what the author meant.

Now let's take one a little more complicated and watch the author play hide-and-seek with his subject and predicate:

> Our problem in the Winter Basin has resulted in the filing of a claim by a private landowner for damages alleged to have been suffered by the encroachment of the Bureau's tree-chaining project.

Again the sentence is grammatically acceptable, although it is over-loaded with passive constructions, excessive prepositions, and heavy noun structures. The grammatical subject and predicate, as written by our author, are "our problem" (the subject) and "has resulted" (predicate). The sentence has a false subject and a wrong and weak predicate. The real action is centered around the verbal-noun, "filing." If *filing* is the true action-verb, then the real subject has to be the *private landowner*. The core meaning is contained in the structure, but what is grammatical to the author is not logical to the reader. The writer's grammatical, logical, and psychological subject are not one and the same thing, and as a result, his grammatical-psychological predicate is a false one, too.

The sentence should read something like this:

> A private landowner in the Winter Basin has filed suit against the Bureau, claiming that our tree-chaining project damaged his property.

We have eliminated the false subject and predicate, have cleared away the undergrowth of heavy modification, and have taken the sentence out of the nonmoving passive and given it motion and direction.

A sentence aimed at nothing always hits its mark.

HOW YOU LET GO OF A SENTENCE

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THERE are simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, compound-complex sentences, major sentences, minor sentences, aggregating sentences, segregating sentences, run-on, head-on, presentative, balanced, heterogeneous, loose sentences, and there are periodic sentences. . . .

Right now we're concerned with only two: the loose and the periodic. We need to know and understand these, for if we handle them expertly, chances are we can handle the rest of them adequately.

Before we start going round-'n-round with our two types of sentences, let's talk about word order in an English sentence, about how the way we place our words determines our grammar and our meaning. English is unique among major modern languages in this reliance on word order for meaning. In fact, it's precisely this that makes English the most versatile language today.

Admittedly, though, it's also this word-order business that makes English one of the toughest languages to write without ambiguity and obscurity; it's too easy in English to dangle or misplace movable modifiers; too easy to plant words in the wrong places; and too easy to be caught with illogical coordination and subordination.

Here are a few examples in which words put in the wrong order gaggle meaning:

Original: On November 12 the district will sponsor a field trip to Maroon by bus, which is 40 miles away.

Comment: The bus isn't 40 miles away; Maroon City is.

Rewrite: On November 12 the district will sponsor a field trip by bus to Maroon City, which is 40 miles away.

Original: The State director objects to drivers who take their eyes off the road to talk to him, strongly.

Comment: The driver doesn't talk to the State director strongly; he's a smarter driver than that. The State director "objects strongly."

Rewrite: The State director objects strongly when drivers take their eyes off the road to talk to him.

Original: The man who works hard usually is competent.

Comment: Does the writer mean the man who works hard usually . . . is competent? Or does he mean that the man who works hard . . . usually is competent?

Rewrite: The man who works hard is usually competent.

Original: After driving 28 miles to the meeting, no ranchers showed up.

Comment: No comment.

Rewrite: After I had driven 28 miles to the meeting, no ranchers showed up.

In English it makes all the difference how words are distributed. For example, it makes all the difference whether we write, "The man bites the dog," or "The dog bites the man." When we invert the order of the words, we reverse the meaning of the sentence.

In classical Latin, where most of our grammar rules come from, it makes no difference where you put the words, or which words go before or come after. The ever-present inflected endings restrict and control meaning absolutely. The normal or natural order of an English sentence is subject-verb-object (or complement). This is the natural way we learned to speak English when we were little and this is the most natural way we continue to speak and write it as adults.

Charlton Laird tells us that the root fact of English grammar is that English words have precise meaning in a certain position in the sentence and are gibberish in another position, and that this fact embodies the most important truth that can be enunciated about English: Word order in the sentence is the basis of English grammar.

So you see, when we deviate from the natural order by dropping in modifiers here and there, usually out of their normal position, or when we start coordinating and subordinating our ideas without patience and logic, we're begging to be misunderstood. These drop-in words and modifiers must be placed with accuracy and precision, and coordination and subordination must be handled with care and intelligence.

In your opinion, did the writer of this BLM sentence do any of these "must things?"

> Christmas, spiced with the old-time flavor of going out and cutting your own tree—free, is available to all Nebraskans this year.

Obviously the word order is out of normal channels, thanks mostly to careless and jumbled internal modification. Our writer couldn't have meant that "Christmas is available to all Nebraskans this year" (courtesy of BLM, free?). He meant that the tree is available and is free. That's what he wanted to say, but he got his words out of normal position, and changed the entire meaning of his sentence from sense to nonsense.

See how a change in the word order in the following sentences brings about a change in meaning.

(1) This is a beautiful day.
(2) A beautiful day this is!
(3) Is this a beautiful day?

Let's start on our two kinds of sentences: Loose and periodic. For definition's sake, we'll take them together, for, since they are opposites, it is easier to define one against the other.

In general "loose" and "periodic" mean how we release or let go of the main elements in our sentences. That is, whether the main elements, subject-verb-object, come first and are followed by nonessential clauses, phrases, and modifiers, as in a loose sentence; or whether we start right off with nonessen-

tial clauses, phrases, and modifiers and suspend the main meaning until the end, as in a periodic sentence:

Loose: The fire crew came off the line early this morning, after working 48 hours straight without sleep and living off scant rations much of the time.

Periodic: After working 48 hours straight without sleep and living off scant rations much of the time, the fire crew came off the line this morning.

Loose: The new directive from Washington puts a freeze on all promotions until such a time as the reorganization is completed and a new organization chart can be drawn up.

Periodic: Until such a time as the reorganization is completed and a new organization chart can be drawn up, the new directive from Washington puts a freeze on all promotions.

When we write a loose sentence, it usually means we are thinking, developing, and writing the sentence all at the same time; that's why we follow the easier, natural order of subject-verb-object; and that's also why, in the loose sentence, we tend to trail off or peter out into anticlimax—adding nonessential words, phrases and clauses, any or all of which are apt to get misplaced or scrambled.

Now, we shouldn't conclude that all loose sentences are bad and all periodic sentences are good. In themselves they are neither. Whether loose or periodic, they are good if they do the job of communication the writer intends; bad if they don't. There are many good reasons for using both types, but by intention and design, not by happenstance and accident. If you can control the use of loose and periodic sentences, you will write with versatility and readability, tone and variety, clarity and simplicity.

The loose sentence, the sentence whose main elements are spilled right off at the head of the sentence, is dominant in all writing, as it is in all talking. This is because the loose sentence is easiest for the writer and the most natural to English. The loose sentence is the backbone of most writing.

Loose sentences are more informal and are characteristic of our conversation, in which we naturally say right off what is most important, and then, by habit, add subordinate elements after the main statement.

The loose sentence does have its weaknesses and limitations. We hesitate to mention them since most government writing overworks the more formal periodic sentence, but feel some insight should help.

The greatest weakness of the loose sentence, when overused, is sheer monotony and boredom. The same subject-verb-object-modifiers . . . . the same subject-verb-object-modifiers . . . . you get the dulling drift. Loose sentences, if allowed to lope along without the writer holding rein on them, will lull or joggle the reader stupid.

Reading loose sentence after loose sentence with the same structures, the same tones, and the same rhythm-patterns is like listening to the same notes

in a bar of music played endlessly on the tuba.

A second major weakness in the loose sentence is that it is likely to contain misplaced modifiers and be anticlimactically UNEMPHATIC—this latter because the end of a sentence, which is by far its most emphatic point, is apt to be reserved, accidentally, for some weak word or phrase that ends the trailing off or petering out of a loose sentence.

See how the modifiers in this loose sentence are out of kilter and how the end of the sentence is made unemphatic:

> The on-the-ground examination of the Golden Horn Lode Claim was completed early this week by our geologist near Surface City, and the completed report, now in preparation, will be in the mail to you sometime next week, which is the target date set by the L&M chief, probably.

Our loose-sentence writing friend could have said it head-on and saved a lot of confusion:

> Our geologist has examined the Golden Horn Lode Claim and is now working on his final report. It should be in your hands sometime next week.

Before turning to periodic sentences, we should look at a rule used by the loose-sentence school of writing: *Write as much like you talk as you can.*

But when we talk, we trip, we falter, we stop, we back up, we hem, we leap ahead, we haw, we start over, we hesitate, we leave things out, we repeat, we drag things in, we ramble, we pause long and often to right ourselves, and we get lost and faked-out in our own sentence.

This is excusable when we talk, for when we are talking, we use numerous nonverbal gimmicks to get our meaning across: We use gestures; we change facial expressions; we change pitch, tempo and rhythm; we dramatize.

More than this, when we talk, we talk with someone who reacts to our message. If we're not getting through, our listener can let us know we're not—by interrupting us, by yawning or looking bored, by withdrawing from the conversation, by asking questions, and by half-a-dozen other ways, not one of which a far-off reader can do for a lonely writer. In addition, when you're talking with (not to) someone, you and your listener learn together. You can give your listener an idea and he can give it back to you, expanded or diminished, chopped up or polished; or he can give you a new slant or a better understanding of it. This kind of give-and-take—this learning along together—you can't do sitting alone writing to a reader who's not there.

It's true that if you're a good writer you can anticipate some of what your reader might add to your thoughts, some of the questions he might ask, but how many of us are good enough or sharp enough to anticipate a reader's reactions at an unseeable distance?

Another thing: How many of us actually write to a real, live, specific, knowable reader, a reader we can conjure up and give presence to? Very few of us do, primarily because it's hard to do; it takes imagination, practice, and discipline. When we take a pencil in hand most of us write to some far-off, mystic blob of humanity that exists only as a vague abstraction

in our own mind. Too many of us fail to become our reader when we write. As a result, many of us write like we were writing to outer space, to a concrete wall, to a steel file cabinet, or to a med-school cadaver.

Some experts tell us to write as much like we talk as we can because when we talk we use shorter sentences, and this is good. What isn't good in writing is to hem and haw and retract as we do in nonorganized conversation. It doesn't work, simply because writing and talking are two different forms of the art of communication. And these different forms call for a different set of tools and disciplines.

We feel these experts really mean: *Write the familiar style.* For this is the closest you can get to writing like you talk and sounding natural and conversational. The familiar style is a beautiful style and it's a *disciplined* style. It is like talk in that it uses common words, common speech rhythms, and common sentence structures which are basically loose, friendly, and short. But it does not use the loose and tacky organization, the disjointed delivery, or the extra words of casual conversation.

And that brings us to our second kind of sentence: The *periodic sentence*, whose main elements are not let go of until the end. See how the writer holds onto, or suspends the main elements until he gets near the end:

> After readying the equipment and filling the tanks with insecticide, and after drawing rations, hand tools, and supplies, the crews were transported by truck to the beetle-infested area.

Notice how the word order is opposite to the natural word order of most English sentences—subject-verb-object first. Periodic sentences are somewhat heavy, formal and artificial, for they do not flow naturally in English, but have to be consciously manufactured. In many ways they are more difficult to read than is the loose sentence. The reader has to keep too much meaning suspended too long. This is especially true when periodic sentences come in clusters, paragraphs, and pages, as they seem to in government writing.

Here's an extremely difficult periodic sentence:

> In order to accomplish a rational, coordinated program of land management and tenure adjustment, in accord with Bureau goals, the various framework in which functional programs are accomplished must, to the greatest extent possible, and on a periodic basis, be objectively defined, analyzed, and put into proper prospective.

Note how many non-essential elements and details you have to keep suspended in your mind before the author lets go of the main elements in his sentence. That makes for complexity in structure and difficulty in reading. This particular periodic sentence does what so many of them do and what makes them more difficult to read and comprehend—it separates or splits apart the subject and verb by throwing modifiers between them.

Note that: (1) the subject, "various framework" is not introduced until you are 19 words into the sentence; (2) the main part of the verb "must" is separated from its subject by 6 words; and (3) the second part of the

verb, "be," is separated from "must" by 10 more words. That is torture for the reader.

As a result of the word-order, the subject is submerged and the verb is chopped up and smothered. This maiming of the subject and verb happens frequently in complex periodic sentences; it seems the writer is so intent on suspending the meaning that he loses sight of what is most important in any sentence—the subject and its verb.

In most of these typical periodic sentences it soon becomes apparent that the writer is suspending his main elements because he isn't quite sure yet what the main elements will be; so he keeps suspending nonessential words, phrases, and clauses until his mind clears up and the main elements show through, if indeed they ever do.

Periodic sentences have their place in all good writing for two basic reasons: (1) they give our writing variety by breaking up the loose-sentence syndrome; and (2) they give our writing suspense and emphasis by holding open the most emphatic point of the sentence, the end, for the most emphatic elements.

The following periodic sentence is a particularly fine one. See how easy it reads, how it is "suspense-full" and how the emphatic ending jolts you awake:

> Despite the recent plans made in the field, some of which are meritorious and perhaps deserving of consideration on their own; and despite the money that was spent, which was not large, but was, nevertheless, inappropriately spent; and despite the commendable enthusiasm shown by the men in the field for these plans—despite all of this, these plans were not programmed for and are, at least for the time being, dead.

What could be clearer or more emphatic or stronger than a periodic sentence such as that? But if you have to read sentence after sentence of such periodicity, you will soon weary of so much suspended meaning, such contrived artificiality, and such habitual heaviness.

Which gives us this general principle to follow in using periodic sentences: Periodic sentences, like the passive voice, ought to be the variation, not the theme in your writing.

SENTENCES: HICCUPPED, STRUNG OUT OR STRAIGHT AHEAD

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ACCORDING to Webster, hiccup means "a spasmodic inbreathing with closure of the glottis, accompanied by a peculiar sound."
Some BLM sentences are like that:

> In cases where the state has authority to and does transfer property which was granted for a specific purpose, the covenant continues to run with the land as long as the land is used for the granted purpose. But if, on disposal, the land is no longer used for the granted purpose, the covenant expires as to the land, but the funds received for the land are impressed with the nondiscrimination obligation. By the same token, when the patentee outleases the land for a use other than the granted purpose, the lessee is not bound by the covenant and the rental payments are impressed with the nondiscrimination obligation.

These sentences never seem to stop hiccupping. They are classics, perfect examples of how feverishly our pour-it-on writers work, how they pour on facts so fast and furiously and in such a short space of time that these copious facts literally rattle around in our heads trying to get coupled up right.

These pour-it-on writers are like the young railroad fireman who thought that the more coal he could shovel into the engine's firebox, the better and hotter the fire would be. He didn't know that such an overstuffed engine couldn't get up enough steam to move itself.

And that's the way with a hiccupped, pour-it-on sentence. It's so fact-full that the reader can't move on until he can separate out the facts and get them hooked up grammatically and logically. Chances are he'll walk off under a full head of steam and leave the bogged-down sentence to itself. Readers are every bit as busy as writers imagine themselves to be.

Here's another BLM sentence that is filled to overflowing with entanglement:

> The unit plan is a device for analyzing a specific geographic area, bringing resource data and program policy together and identifying the proper land classification, multiple use mix and action schedule for the public lands involved.

Now no one past the age of reason would call that sentence easy to read or understand. Despite its length and weight, it has the form of a simple sentence. But it is modified extensively by complex prepositional phrases that are themselves pregnant with ideas. Notice how much the reader has to carry in his head, how many complex prepositional phrases he has to criss-cross, and how often he has to refer back in the sentence in order to keep the excess modification properly hooked up. Here is the sentence in outline:

Main idea: "The unit plan is a device . . . ."
Main preposition: "for . . . ."
First modifying idea: object of "for"———: analyzing (1) a specific geographic area . . . ."
Second modifying idea: object of "for"———: "bringing (1) resource data and (2) program policy together . . . ."

Third modifying idea: object of "for"———: "identifying (1) proper land classification; (2) multiple use mix; and (3) action schedule for public lands."

The sentence has at least 10 distinct ideas crammed into 36 words; that's about 7 or 8 ideas too many for even the best minds among us. Most of us just aren't intellectually porous enough to soak up so much message in so short a breathing space.

There's only one way to handle a hiccupping sentence like that: write it over.

We've told you how bad that simple sentence was. Let's see how good it looks compared to this:

> Previous statutory or regulatory actions, which prohibit certain land uses, or otherwise create conditions that are not subject to change, by BLM action, in the relatively near future, constitutes restrictions on planning, and should be recognized early.

There are too many ideas and too many back turns for the reader to grasp:

First *main* idea: "statutory or regulatory actions . . . . (1) constitutes (wrong verb) restrictions and (2) should be recognized early . . . ."

First subordinate idea, modifying "actions"———: "which . . . . (1) prohibit certain land uses, and (2) or otherwise create conditions . . . ."

Second *subordinate* idea, modifying "conditions"———: "that . . . . (1) are not subject to change, and (2) by BLM action in the relatively near future . . . ."

There is simply no need to fill the sentence-bucket so full of crissed-crossed ideas; the reader won't carry it far if you do. To add to the difficulty, this sentence is periodic, which means that the reader has to keep the crissed-crossed modifications suspended in his mind until the end.

In an instruction memo such as this all the suspense should be eliminated; you're not trying to impress the reader with literary gadgetry—you're trying to *inform* him with clarity and meaning. He shouldn't have to wade through the muck of suspended gobbledygook to get at clean meaning.

Let's breathe our way through one more unintentionally funny, hiccupped sentence from a BLM brochure. The writer had nothing to say but he had time and space to say it in. Notice, too, how the "hard-pressed writer" drags in everything but the warehouse plumbing system in this non-needed sentence:

> But even the improved control measures of recent years may become obsolete with weather modifications (?), aircraft that travel with great speed horizontally (??*!!) that take off and land vertically (???!!), mechanized line building equipment that can be airlifted, perhaps detection by radar, and even more fantastic developments (???!!)

Now let's think a little about sentence length. It seems we're constantly being told to write short sentences. In general this is good, sound advice, for short sentences are usually easier to look at, easier to read, and easier to

digest. Studies of comparative sentence length over the past three centuries show that our sentences are getting progressively shorter; 300 years ago they averaged about 60 words; 100 years ago they averaged about 30; today they average about 20.

The readability word-counters keep shouting: "Short sentences! Short sentences! Short sentences!" But to insist that every idea must be expressed in 20 words or less is to fly in the face of logic. A short sentence can be every bit as hard for a reader to plow through as a long sentence. Take these two short sentences that deal with estimating the value of recreation uses (a semicolon is counted the same as a period.):

> The unit of use or product is visitor days; however, these units have wide variation in value, due to wide variations in the quality of the experience.

The second sentence has only 18 words, but it's a mean one to read and understand because of the broad, general, and abstract words. And just as a short sentence can be obscure and difficult, so can a long sentence be clear and easy, since it's not so much how many words a sentence has, as how it's built and how its parts are balanced, coordinated and subordinated.

That last sentence you just read, for instance, has 44 words. Yet it's easy reading, since it has good motion, good rhythm, and a good balance. It's not unusual to find sentences of 75 or 100 words in Winston Churchill's writings, yet he is considered one of the great writers of the last half century. It isn't fair, then, to arbitrarily impose a rigid word-count on any writer. Neither is it fair for the writer to ignore the great gobs of research which show that the average reader today, whether a high school or a college graduate, overwhelmingly prefers to read sentences that average out at around 20 words.

This latter situation, the ignoring of readers' preference by writers, is precisely the situation that exists in BLM today. We are living in an age where short sentences are in increased demand, but in government writing they are in short supply. One reason we write such long sentences is that, after finishing what started out to be a sentence, we realize we haven't yet said what we wanted to, so we keep on going until we finally say it. Apparently we don't realize that *thinking* must precede writing.

What do we do when we find that our sentences are running too long for the average reader? Well, there is really only one thing to do, especially since longness and complexity are so often found welded together in the same sentence: We have to break up the sentence, and we can do this in one of two ways: (1) By editing and adding punctuation marks; or (2) By rewriting.

Of the two, the latter is the better. You'll nearly always find in rewriting long, complex sentences that both the longness and the complexity got in there because you hadn't thought your ideas through before you set about writing them into sentences. Breaking the long, complex sentence into two or three or more simple sentences will force you to think more clearly and therefore to write more clearly.

For example, take this BLM sentence written to a county clerk:

> This letter is in response to your personal request of Mr. David Jones of this office to be furnished the official listing of the legal descriptions of all federal lands in your county under administration of the Bureau of Land Management, and I regret to inform you that we do not have such a list as you request, since it would be physically impossible for the Bureau to compile and maintain such a list.

That's a 74-word sentence, which means it's long, and it's sloppily put together, which means it's complex.

Let's analyze it and see what we can do. First off, there are but two main ideas in the sentence: (1) You want a list; (2) We don't have one. This letter actually could have been written about that bluntly, saving 60 or more words, but courtesy and common sense demand more in a personal letter to one of our taxpaying employers.

What else is pertinent about the sentence? Little else, it seems, except that the request involved communication between three human beings, the county clerk, David Jones, and the lands and minerals chief.

Let's see how the sentence might have been written a little more clearly, with a little more friendliness, and perhaps a little shorter:

> David Jones tells me you have asked for an official listing by legal description, of all federal lands managed by BLM in your county.
>
> I wish I could help you but I can't. You see, there is no such list, and I doubt that there will be one in the near future; it would simply be physically impossible for BLM to compile and keep current such a list.

Although we saved only six words, we did turn one long sentence into four short ones, and we ironed out the quick curves and turns. And we gave the letter a rather friendly (we care about you) tone, thanks mostly to the use of personal pronouns, nine in all.

Now we know there will be some who will object to our rewrite of this letter on grounds that it doesn't sound official enough, or it doesn't sound dignified enough—it just doesn't sound like government writing. And that, we think, is what recommends it most. If you don't agree, put yourself in the reader's shoes and ask which letter you would have preferred to receive.

Now to our third kind of sentence, the one we call "straight-ahead."

There's a dirty word the experts use when they talk about rambly, serpentine writing; the word is "circumlocution." According to the big Webster, it means "indirect or roundabout expression." And that's what we mean, too. Circumlocution means the opposite of a straight-ahead sentence.

You will notice our samples of indirect or roundabout sentences are not necessarily always foggy, but they are necessarily always dull, wishy-washy and wordy. The mark of roundabout, not straight-ahead sentences is that they always waste words:

> Protection of watersheds from which local communities procure their fresh water supplies is one of BLM's most important multiple use land goals. (22 words)

Although the meaning is clear enough, the writing is wordy and roundabout. Let's see if we can rewrite it in straight-ahead fashion:

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One of BLM's most important goals is protecting watersheds that supply fresh water to local communities. (16 words, a saving of 6)

Although this next rewrite may sound too abrupt, we don't think it is; it's short, it's straight-ahead, and there's no question about BLM's doing the action, being the "protector":

BLM protects watersheds that supply fresh water to local communities. (10 words, a saving of 12)

Here's another sample from a BLM memo:

It is anticipated that the results of this clarifying memo will be to eliminate the possibility of any further misinterpretation of the objectives intended in the original memo. (28 words)

There's no sense taking that many words to say what could have been said quicker and easier:

We hope this clarifying memo will keep you from any further misinterpretation of our original memo. (16 words, a saving of 12)

When a sentence is roundabout it usually means the writer was trying to write and think at the same time, and did not know yet what his true subject and verb were. He is indirect and roundabout simply because he is groping for words to express meaning that is not clear in his own mind. Or it might mean the writer is cocksure, careless, or lazy.

The next sample is aimed more at paternalistically propagandizing BLM than it is at circulating genuine public information.

Typical of BLM action, which makes it possible for the obtaining of land by individuals, was the designation of an area just south of Royal City, where BLM made 25 small tract sites available last year. (36 words)

We can see what the writer had in mind, what he was trying to do. Rather than write a straight-ahead sentence that would give clear information to the reader, he got carried away trying to make BLM appear the always generous big brother by using the opening. "Typical of BLM action. . . ."

This false emphasis is a form of insincere writing, and whether the writer knows it or not, the reader knows it. And a writer gets caught quicker for insincerity than for anything else, even if the dishonesty is unintentional. The writer shaped the sentence to propagandize BLM rather than to fit the natural action of the sentence.

We can reconstruct the sentence straight-ahead this way and still put the emphasis on BLM:

Last year BLM set aside 25 small-tract sites south of Royal City for sale to individuals. (17 words, a saving of 19)

Or if the writer wanted to throw the first-place emphasis on "individuals," he could have written his sentence straight-ahead like this:

Individuals last year were given the opportunity to buy one of 25 small tracts of public land which BLM set aside south of Royal City. (26 words, a saving of 10)

Quit hiccupping; say what you need to say in a way that can be grasped immediately.

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THE PRINCIPLE BEHIND PRINCIPLES

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TO be a good writer you have to start with some understanding of the chore and with a set of basic principles. The first point you must understand is this: to be even a passably good writer, you have to sweat and labor long and hard, doggedly and desperately, and you have to know and feel that your writing is worth the sweat.

The second point is that you have to learn to become your reader. There's no way out of it. If you are to make contact with your reader, if your words are to get through to him, you have to be able to think like he thinks, feel like he feels, react like he reacts, anticipate like he anticipates, and question like he questions. The person who most often comes between the writer and his reader is the writer himself. Too often the writer, being unable or unwilling to imagine-up a real person to write to, writes to himself to please himself.

A third point to keep in mind is that you must write in a style that is appropriate, that is custom-cut to fit the subject matter and the reader. If your writing is to get through to your reader, you have to adjust your style without *writing down* to people under you, or *writing up* to people over you. No one can teach style to any man, since style *is* the man, the particular way he alone puts words together to carry ideas. But we can point out three principles that are necessary to all writing.

The fact that we learned these basic principles in freshman English, which is a good many miles behind some of us, doesn't erase the fact that most of us write as though we didn't know they existed. Nevertheless, we must know and use them if we are to heal the wounds that bleed so much life from our writing and let so much dead air into it. These principles are all aimed at getting rid of sluggish abstraction and prosaic pomp and at adding *sense appeal*, vividness and motion.

Our first principle: *Use picturesque language*—language that appeals to and stimulates the five senses, figurative language that stirs the imagination, language that produces sense images.

You can get picturesque or figurative language into your writing in many different ways; you don't do it merely by drawing pictures with words, although this is the first and most obvious way. Writing can be figurative in simulating action, in giving feel and tone, in bringing about rhythm and sound, and in arousing reader reaction.

You've probably been told just the opposite since coming to government, for there are strong traditions demanding that "official" writing be impersonal and objective, and consequently, picture-less, not picturesque. These traditions may have been all right 50 years ago, but today when government and industry move on paper, they don't make any more sense than canvas-covered fighter planes. How far can you go in your day's work without reading or without writing? Not far.

Like all traditions, traditions about "official" writing die hard. But they are dying, nonetheless, because they are too expensive, too inefficient, and too out-of-date for us to cherish longer. In brief, government writers have got to

get in step with the times. It isn't easy to keep in step in these times when the world's total knowledge doubles itself every 2½ years, when we have 32 times as much to teach and learn as we had at the time of Christ, but have increased our communications ability by a paltry factor of 2.

Even in the mystic world of science, such geniuses as the late Albert Einstein found it impossible to write "pure science" without using picture-words and an alive style. His work is full of trains, clocks, ships, and marble tables made into metaphors. Einstein often complained that one thing the world lacked most was writers who could make the world of science and technology intelligible to the average reader, who, as Einstein said, has a right to share in such knowledge.

See how this great intellect explains a Euclidian continuum:

> The surface of a marble table is spread out before me. I can get from any one point on this table to any other point by passing continuously from one point to a neighboring one and repeating this process a large number of times, or, in other words, by going from point to point without executing jumps. We express this property on the surface by describing the latter as a continuum.

Writing clear prose was an agonizing, time-taking job for Einstein, but he recognized that the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of readers is by being specific, definite, and concrete.

When we say "Use figurative language," we don't mean that you should join the "arty" set, or go "all the way with Hemingway." In fact, that's precisely what we don't mean. What we do mean is that you should be as colorful and artistic in your writing as in your talking. Most of us use figurative language in our every-day speech, and it's too bad we don't do the same in our "official" writing; it would be a lot easier on our readers, whose imaginations are always searching for sense images to enlighten their minds.

When we use figurative language we merely take what is unfamiliar and abstract, the thing we want our readers to see and know, and liken it to something that is familiar and concrete, things our readers already see and know. These figures of speech can be elaborate, running a paragraph or more; or simple, running a word or two:

". . . . He was *all in a lather.*"
". . . . That's our *safety valve.*"
". . . . He offered him a *hand of encouragement.*"
". . . . About as attractive *as a shrunken head.*"
". . . . I knew he *had hay on his horns* when he called."
". . . . He was *ticked off good.*"
". . . . It's the best *in the long run.*"
". . . . He *came all unglued* when he heard that."
". . . . Those cars were *skipping around on the ice like skate-bugs.*"
". . . . It would be easier to *take a spider's pulse* than to get a word in while he's talking.
". . . . He's about *as organized as a can of worms!*"
" . . . He'll *play ball* on that kind of a deal."

Many figures of speech are spontaneous and original, but even a few "currentisms" or out-worn cliches may help add some color, sparkle, and aliveness to your writing.

Where is the color, sparkle, and aliveness in this typical sentence that might have been written by any of us?

> Knowledge and evaluation of projected policies and programs of other agencies and groups is [wrong verb] a necessary requisite to the proper formulations of the Bureau's future role in resource development and subsequent determination of program emphasis.

What images did you get? Probably none at all. Yet it is this kind of counterfeit writing that passes among us every day, acting as legal tender for our exchange of ideas. It's true there was a time when such puffed-up writing was venerated by the average reader, a time when there were few readers and the average reader could barely read. Those days have long since passed, even though we continue to write as though they had not.

We hear all the time that certain technical Bureau writing is too complex to get into simple, concrete, picturesque language. It isn't so. You can do it if you'll think and sweat.

Several years ago Prof. Rueben G. Gustavson, a keen intellect and noted scientist-educator, handled one of the most complex of subjects, the story behind the atom bomb, for one of the Nation's most intellectually elite groups, the Executive Club of Chicago. Here are excerpts from what Gustavson wrote. Note the every-day imagery and the on-the-street simplicity; note, too, the absence of pretense and the lack of anything even hinting of intellectual pride.

He used such concrete examples as these:

> . . . . We conceived of these atoms as being something like billiard balls. . . .
>
> . . . . small particles of steam, which we call molecules, are in rapid motion, and the piston of a steam locomotive moves because billions of these pound on it. . . .
>
> . . . . In other words, the path of this particle was something like the path of a high-speed automobile. It is going down the straight-away, and as long as everything is clear, it goes well. . . .
>
> . . . . this alpha particle is from radium, which is the shotgun the physicists use to knock things to pieces. . . .
>
> . . . . splitting the uranium atom is something like cutting a 16-ounce loaf of bread in half. . . .
>
> . . . . for example, it is as though you were to take 100,000 people from Chicago and weigh them . . . . then you go to Colorado and pick 100,000 more and weigh them. . . .
>
> . . . . what you do is set up a sort of race track. I am sure that you would say that if School A has a bunch of kids who can run a mile a second and School B has a bunch of kids who can run a quarter of a mile a second, it is easy to separate them . . . . etc.

And this tremendous story by this tremendous man goes on and on, never leaving the abstract to stand in fuzzy silhouettes without having clear, concrete, familiar images to give them solid flesh. So you see, it is not so much the subject matter that controls the writer as it is the writer who controls his subject matter by giving it fresh life in simplicity and imagery. And you also see that no matter how far you go on with your education or how

intellectually mature you think you have become, you never outgrow the need for simple writing and commonplace images; although we can see some BLM purists gag if they ran across a phrase like a "bunch of kids" in an official BLM memo. No doubt it would get changed to something like "an agglomeration of young citizens." It's too bad, but that's the way it is—it's tradition.

Gustavson's vivid, on-the-move writing is in an age apart from this:

> Changes in communication, in office procedures and field techniques, and in the nature and emphasis of the various Bureau programs themselves will require constant adaptation of new and varied administrative procedures within the Bureau to maintain maximum efficiency.

That sentence is the "maximum efficiency" in the accomplished art of saying practically nothing at all. The writer wanted to say that "the administration division of BLM will have to stay abreast of the rapid changes being made in communications, office procedures, field techniques, and programing." But saying it that way would have been too simple, too unimportant-sounding, too untraditional.

Don't be afraid to use figures, but never use them unless they hit you spontaneously, like a sudden light hits a dark room, and they will hit you this way, if you train your imagination to see what Aristotle called "the likeness in all things."

Never use figures of speech for their own sake, simply because they look pretty or sound poetic; that is, never use them unless they grow naturally out of the thought you're handling and unless they add reality, freshness, color, tone, motion, or sense to your thought. For example, when a Bureau field man described small, flowered, mound-like forbs as looking like "tiny pink igloos" he added freshness, size, color, and familiarity for our imaginations to lay hold of and see vividly.

Never overuse figures of speech, for having too many of them is worse than having none; when overworked, figures make for artificiality. We might point out that good writers today shun the elaborate, more arabesque figures so popular in more flamboyant times now past. Nevertheless, the fact remains that figures of speech are as natural and essential to good writing as sharps and flats to good music.

See how the following figure of speech adds sharpness and vividness. The memo dealt with the "good and imaginative program work" many individuals had done last year "to upgrade our technology." It then went on to regret that this work had never been drawn together to form a single overall program:

> They [these individual programs] were like constructing several separate road segments which didn't add up to a good road system because they weren't part of a master transportation plan at the outset.

This kind of figurative writing is colorful and easily understood. It is much better, clearer, and more alive than the traditional BLM writing, which would have run along something like this:

> The multifarious, overlapping program contributions by a myriad of individuals acting independently failed to result in a single, comprehensive program because of the fact that at their incipience they were not governed and regulated by a carefully conceived master plan under which they could have matured to systematic singularity.

Enough of that nonsense!

Our second principle is: Use short, familiar words whenever you can and long and abstract ones only when you have to for sense or preciseness. The reasons for this principle are many and meaningful. First of all, familiar English, plain English as we use it day in and day out, is heavily monosyllabic. This may startle you, since you're so used to reading government prose which is heavily laden with long, polysyllabic words of foreign birth. The fact remains that the English language of today is more nearly like the monosyllabic Chinese than any other tongue of the Indo-European family.

Still another reason for using short words in English is that they are nearly always vivid and alive words, words that are picturesque and concrete, words that stand for real people, actual places, and live actions, words that make up 70 percent of our plain talking and clear writing.

Here's what Gelett Burgess says about short and familiar words:

> This is a plea for the use of more short words in our talk and in what we write. Through the lack of them, our speech is apt to grow stale and weak, and, it may be, hold more sham than true thought. For long words at times tend to, or do blur what we say.
>
> What I mean is this: If we use long words too much, we are apt to talk in ruts and use the same old, worn ways of speech. This tends to make what we say dull, with no force or sting. But if we use short words, we have to say real things, things we know, and say them in a fresh way. We find it hard to hint or dodge or hide or half say things.
>
> For short words are bold. They say just what they mean. They do not leave you in doubt. They are clear and sharp, like signs cut in a rock.

There isn't 1 of those 162 words that has more than 1 syllable; what's more, these 162 one-syllable words were taken from an 8-page, 1-syllable piece of writing.

Our next principle for ridding our writing of sluggish abstraction and traditional pomp is: Make use of variety. Although this "rule" may not sound too important, without it any lengthy piece of writing is a cinch to end up in the word heap of dullness. For just as "variety is the spice of life," so also it is "the savor of sentences."

We don't mean that rudimentary variety that comes from starting every sentence, or nearly every sentence, with a different part of speech, such as first an article, then a noun, then a participle, then an infinitive, then a preposition, and so on. It's true that by changing parts of speech you will get a variety of sorts, but most of the time it ends up being a mechanical variety. This manufactured variety frequently looks good and may even work well for a time, but it is artificial. Variety is so subtle that you cannot suddenly say to yourself: "I will now endow my writing with variety." It just doesn't work that way, and the harder you try to make it work, the more

artificial it becomes. True variety has to grow out of you as a person-writer and out of the thoughts you are writing. True variety is not merely a way of writing, it is also a way of feeling and thinking.

We discussed in a previous chapter how variety can be obtained by changing off on the various types of sentences. We have seen how variety can be won by going from simple to compound or complex sentences; by changing from making a statement to asking a question; by crossing over from loose to periodic, etc.

In this chapter we have spoken of the variety we can get by opening each sentence with a different part of speech. Yet there are countless other general principles of variety, only three of which we have time to look at now.

The first is to use inversions, that is, throw the sentence into a word order that does not follow the subject-predicate-object pattern, the pattern most natural and frequent in English today. You approach this kind of inverted variety when you keep changing the parts of speech that begin your sentences. But the likeness is only apparent. When you systematically change the part of speech, you are following a "hard-set mechanical rule," and neither your own personality nor the nature of your thought comes into play to shape the sentence naturally. But when you consciously or subconsciously invert a sentence naturally, you do so because you inwardly feel that the nature of your thought needs inverting in order to shift motion or emphasis and make your meaning clearer to your reader.

Inversion well handled makes for true and interesting variety. Winston Churchill, a master of the long sentence, was also a master of the inverted sentence; see how effectively he uses inversion in this sentence from *The Birth of Britain:*

> "You will beat them," he said, and—marking the town of Preston with his thumbnail on the map—"you will beat them there!" And on November 13, beaten there they were.

A second way to obtain true variety is to interrupt or slow down the movement or rhythm pattern of a sentence by putting modifiers between the main elements. This type of variety should be sought only when the writer feels that the thought demands a slow-down in order to give the reader a rest period or longer look at the sentence. If these sentence interruptions are too artificial or frequent they also become mannerisms that make the writing unreal and the reading difficult.

See in the following sentences how interruptions work to give variety:

A third method of gaining variety is to vary the length of your sentences. Mix and blend them so they will average out at about 20 words, which is the way today's readers want them.

Typical sentence: "The fire was brought under control only after the Indian crews arrived late last night."

Interrupted sentence: "Only after the Indian crews arrived, which was late last night, was the fire brought under control."

HIGH COST OF THE WRITTEN WORD

YOU can talk about the high cost of planting pine trees, drilling wells, running the copying machine, or spraying sagebrush, and people will understand you. You'll get through to them; they'll see what you are talking about and they'll know right off, for a fact, that these things cost a lot of money.

But try talking to these same people about the high cost of the written word and see what happens. They'll nod agreement and be shocked that words can cost so much. They'll shake their heads and mumble something about such high cost being "absolutely unbelievable." But do they really understand? Do they realize what you're talking about; do they see these high costs for what they are?

We can't buy words like we buy pine seedlings, or stockwater wells, so it's as though words have no inherent value and can't be measured in money or evaluated in terms of costs.

The fact is that in BLM, as in all Government agencies and private industries, more people are working at producing words than at anything else. Producing words is the biggest single work program we have, and, like any other big work program, it costs hard, cold cash, cash by the hundreds of thousands of dollars, dollars we wouldn't spend lightly if we were buying something we could yardstick out, count and weigh, and get a bid on.

Why is it that the most expensive work activity we have, the one that involves the greatest number of employees, that requires acquired skill and human understanding, the one on which all other work programs depend, is the one that gets the least attention and consideration?

Prof. W. F. Carstens of the Sandia Corporation says that one-fourth of the most expensive manpower in any organization is devoted to turning out written words, and when one adds the fact that a high percentage of the product of all this effort is of poor quality, it is clear something should be done about it.

Using this one-fourth figure and considering salaries alone, we get a writing cost of $275,000 a year for our own top echelon. This does not include the cost of paper, typing, duplicating, mailing, reading, or—more important—the cost for salaries of others who write and the hundreds who read.

Now if you add three-fifths of that $275,000, or $165,000, as the cost of getting the words typed and mailed, you come out with a total of $440,000 for a portion of BLM writing for a single year. We can't treat costs like these as though they were insignificant.

For every word you write in a letter or a memo, you pay 1.6 cents; for every 10 words you write, you could buy 16 one-year-old pine seedlings. Or

for the cost of the 38 million words BLM writers put into memos, letters, and news releases in 1 year, you could buy 60.8 million pine seedlings, enough to cover 101,000 acres with 600 trees per acre. Or you could spray 204,000 acres at $2.50 an acre, or plow and reseed 60,800 acres of range land at $10 per acre.

Do these costs sound like words come cheap, as though they were a minor item in the annual budget?

Here's the way we figured our costs on an average 250-word BLM memo or letter:

Writer's costs:

(1) 15 minutes—preparation time, researching, thinking, etc.;

(2) 15 minutes—dictating time, proofing, signing, etc.;

Total: 30 minutes at $5 per hour (middle of Grade 11) ---- [1] $2.50

Secretary's costs:

(1) 10 minutes—dictating time;

(2) 20 minutes—transcribing, proofing, folding, etc.;

Total: 30 minutes at $3 per hour (top of Grade 5) ---------- $1.50

Total cost of memo or letter ---------- $4.00

Now let's see how we arrived at the total of 152,000 letters and memos written in the Bureau in 1 year:

BLM letters-memos for 1 year at average cost of $4 per letter-memo

Office(s)	Total 1 year	Average per week per office(s)	Total cost for office(s)	Total cost to bureau
Washington	[1] 42,000	807	$168,000	.....
11 State offices	58,000	[2] 102	232,000	.....
66 District offices	52,000	[2] 16	208,000	.....
Total	[3] 152,000	925	608,000	[4] $608,000

[1] This 42,000 figure is an estimate by the Washington office.

[2] Each.

[3] This 152,000 total does not include the letters that pour out of land offices and service centers by the thousands each month; nor does it include the bundles of special reports, studies, and publications prepared yearly by BLM. The 102 weekly average for each State is no doubt low, as some States probably put out two or three times that many each week. And the 16-each weekly average for district offices also probably is low, as some of the bigger districts may put out 16 or more a day.

[4] This $608,000, it should be remembered, represents only a *small part* of the total cost BLM pays for the written word each year.

[1] Actually, this $2.50 writing cost is low for an average 250-word memo or letter, if it is to be readably well done. Tests and checks in our own office show that for a writer to start off cold on a 250-word memo, he probably needs (and takes) 60 to 80 minutes, or even more. This is especially true of memos that have to be read and understood by a number of people on the receiving end. Moreover, this $2.50 figure is unrealistic in that it does not permit any time for rough drafting, editing, or rewriting, time which most readable memos demand, need, and sometimes get.

The thing to remember here is that this $608,000, which for convenience, we'll round off at $600,000, does not include reading and translating costs at the other end, where word-costs skyrocket. One thing is certain: $600,000 is not peanuts, is a big budget item, does deserve careful attention and scrutiny.

And here are a few national statistics: Writing-cost analyst Richard Morris figures that 15 percent of all letters and memos are fog-induced, are merely requests for clarification of a previous letter or memo. This would mean that in the year under review, 15 percent of 152,000 letters and memos, or 22,800, which means 5,700,000 words costing $91,200 were wasted and unnecessary, were written solely because of and in answer to fog. That's nearly $100,000 down the drain, plus the cost of wasted time and energy in reading, plus the cost of confusion in trying to translate and in writing for clarification.

Another waste-factor in BLM writing is the "no-need-for" letters and memos, those which shouldn't have been written in the first place. There is no exact way of knowing what percentage of the total these make up, but our own records for 6 months show a 6-percent figure; 6 out of every 100 letters and memos were "no-need-fors." This 6-percent figure is lower by several percentage points than many BLM readers think it should be. If we use this figure, and we, too, suspect it is far too low, then a total of 9,120 memos and letters were wasted, or 1,365,000 words at a cost of $36,480.

Now if we add the fog-induced memos and the no-need-for memos, we get a total of 31,920 wasted copies, 7,980,000 words costing $127,680. Which also doesn't come under the heading of peanuts, nor in the category of small budget items.

Nor are we finished with these waste-cost figures. It's commonly accepted that business writing is twice as wordy as necessary and that government writing is wordier than business writing. This doesn't mean that writing costs are double for a double-length memo or letter, but it does mean that BLM writers produced 38 million words in memos and letters in 1 year, when 19 million would have been enough. So if BLM letters and memos had been put in simple, direct English during the year under review, the Bureau would have saved $304,000! Added to the costs of no-need-for and fog-induced memos, this totals $431,680.

That's only one side of the word-cost coin, the writing side, where costs are lowest. On the other side of the coin, the reading-translating side, costs are devastating. Just how long has it been since you sat in on a special, executive-level meeting that was called solely for the purpose of figuring out exactly what a memo meant, what a directive said, or what a study or report recommended? These costs, too, are generally ignored or looked upon as trivial. Nobody seems to understand them well enough to do something about them.

Before we show you these reading-translating costs, we'd like to make a point: The extra time the writer gives to making a memo clear and readable is time economically spent, is money saved. Too many writers feel time spent in writing has no economic value, that if you are a competent writer, you're also a fast writer. Patience and time-consuming care are sneered at and quickness is extolled.

The table at the end of this chapter shows you that if the writer of the tabulated memo had spent a full 8 hours making it clear and readable, he could have saved the Bureau $422.50. This is where we ought to learn a simple economic principle: A writer can afford to increase his writing time in direct proportion to the number of people who have to read and understand his memo.

In practice this principle works like this: If you write a gobbledygooked memo that goes to 100 people for action, a memo that takes 30 minutes to read and translate when it should have taken only 5, then your bad writing consumes 50½ hours ($252.50) of writing and reading time when it should have consumed only 8⅝ hours ($44.17).

In other words, even though you cost the Bureau only $2.50 for the half-hour you took to write the memo, you cost it another $208.33 for the time you DIDN'T take to write it clearly, for the time you caused your readers to wrestle with words and meanings.

What's more, you could have spent 42 hours writing this same memo to make it readable, down to 5 minutes, and the memo wouldn't have cost the Bureau one single penny more than it did by your flapping it out in 30 minutes.

Therefore, when you figure the actual cost of the written word, you always have to figure in the reading and translating time on the other end of the line, where costs bunch up and multiply. The cost formula on anything written, and you can figure this very easily yourself, is worked out like this:

> PT (preparation time) plus RT (reading time) times NR (number of readers) equals: Total cost of the written word.

Remember that a very slight increase in writing time can often result in a very large total savings in reading time; or, a very large increase in writing time can also result in a very large increase in total savings in reading time.

Now, see this formula and these principles at work in the following table, which was built from an actual 250-word BLM memo that by actual count was circulated for action to 230 readers. The original memo was rated very difficult reading, but it was edited down and rewritten several times until it rated as very easy reading. See how, even though the preparation time increases radically each time, the reading and translating costs continue to go down, and the savings continue to multiply:

250-word instruction memo—rated "very difficult reading"—mailed to 230 BLM employees "for action"

Time writer spent preparing memo at $5 hr.	Writing cost totals			Total reading-writing costs and savings			
	Time secretary spent preparing memo for mailing at $3/hr.	Total cost to prepare and mail memo	Average cost per reader to prepare and mail memo (cents)	Average time for reader to read-understand memo at $5/hr.	Cumulative costs for 230 readers to read-understand memo	Total writing reading costs	Total dollars saved
30 min.=$2.50	30 min.=$1.50	$4.00	1.7	30 min.=$2.50 each	$575.00	$579.00	
Writer doubles preparation time to 1 hour=$5.	30 min.=$1.50	6.50	2.8	Reading time cut to 20 min.=$1.67 each.	Down to $384.10	390.60	$188.40
Writer doubles preparation time to 2 hours=$10.	30 min.=$1.50	11.50	5	Reading time cut to 15 min.=$1.25 each.	Down to $287.50	299.00	280.00
Writer doubles preparation time to 4 hours=$20.	30 min.=$1.50	21.50	9.3	Reading time cut to 10 min.=$0.83 each.	Down to $190.90	212.40	366.60
Writer doubles preparation time to 8 hours=$40.	30 min.=$1.50	41.50	18	Reading costs cut to 5 min.=$0.50 each.	Down to $115.00	156.50	422.50
Writer reduces preparation time to nothing.	Nothing	Nothing	Nothing	Nothing	Nothing	Nothing	[1] 579.00

[1] This was a "no-need-for" memo; it never should have been written in the first place.

PRESS RELEASES

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HERE are three real "popular," but oh so hackneyed, expressions we picked out of State news releases:

1. "At impressive ceremonies . . ." (somehow, all BLM ceremonies are impressive—but not to many readers and not to any editors);
2. "Spirited bidding . . ." (this particular bidding was so "spirited" it involved two bidders—one of whom was eliminated before this "impressive ceremony" was over);
3. Elected . . . elected"—here's a really "smashing" lead—"As the result of an advisory board election, John Allen and William Eton were elected." (Only the names were changed to protect those "elected" at the "election"!)

You can find fog in BLM writing anywhere you look—in your mail, reading file, letters, memos, reports, press releases . . .

And that's our prose problem for this chapter—press releases. In our Gobbledygook File we found this:

> The Department of the Interior announced today that rules for crossing permits and reimbursement for unauthorized use by livestock, similar to those provided by the Federal Range Code for grazing districts, have been extended to include some 26 million acres of Federal lands not in grazing districts.
>
> The lands affected are the so-called "Section 15 Lands," administered by the Bureau of Land Management, which have not been included within grazing districts established under the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934.
>
> The new amendment to the regulations sets crossing permit fees. It also establishes damage charges to be assessed against owners of unauthorized livestock on Section 15 Lands, so that the Federal Government will be compensated for forage used by the animals. This has been done by extending the provisions of the Federal Range Code for grazing districts to Section 15 Lands.
>
> The new rules will simplify grazing administration by making the rules the same for both types of land.
>
> The new rules provide that BLM will charge owners of straying livestock for forage consumed similar to the charges assessed for grazing district lands.

Before we take a whirl at dismembering this, let's make a general point or two.

(1) A news release should be the clearest and classiest piece of writing that comes out of BLM. After all, it presents BLM to the public.

(2) Each news release should be tailor-made so it won't wilt under the eye of an editor or fungus-up the mind of the reader.

Editors won't tolerate gobbledygook in a press release. They are used to getting news releases from industry and business that have a writer's grade of 60 or 65, but even these make them mad! To deliver a BLM release that drops to 45 or 50 is to risk losing a friend you need—the editor.

The average reader won't tolerate gobbledygook, either. Research tells why: Readers are in a hurry. They grudgingly give 20 minutes a day to reading the paper; less than 50 percent of them read more than 1 story out of

every 25 printed. And busy readers like readable writing—anything with a writer's grade that hits 75 or 80 (*Reader's Digest and Time Magazine.*) Even professional people—doctors, lawyers, professors, technicians, etc., won't stand still for a writer's grade under 65 or 70 (*Harpers* and *Atlantic.*)

Therefore:

To keep harried editors happy and hurried readers relaxed, BLM press releases should shoot for a writer's grade of 75 or 80 and never settle for anything under 70.

(3) Press releases should be written *to* and *for* the average reader—one outside BLM—and not to or for anyone else! Not the State director. Not the forester. Not the district manager. Not the range manager. Not the land office manager. Not the solicitor. Not the mining engineer. Not anybody but John Q. Reader!

If you really want to know if your message is getting through, ask your newest secretary. She's a more "average newspaper reader" than your technician friends. Too many technicians, in the name of "precision, protection, and dignity," will spoil a professional press release that was simple, solid, and interesting when it started out.

(4) And, finally, the opening sentence or paragraph of every press release should sink its teeth in and "hook" the reader immediately—trap his interest, stir his curiosity, and whet his appetite.

Let's get back to our BLM release, asking . . . . is it clear? . . . . classy? . . . . fog free? . . . . and nontechnical?

If you were an editor, would it satisfy you? If you were a reader, would it hook you?

> The Department of the Interior announced today that rules for crossing permits and reimbursement for unauthorized use by livestock, similar to those provided by the Federal Range Code for grazing districts, have been extended to include some 26 million acres of Federal lands not in grazing districts.

Well, what do you think? Is it good? We don't think it is—and neither did a doctor, a veteran newsman, a magazine writer, a college professor, or a retired farmer. Not one of them voluntarily read past the lead paragraph; all of them were "snowed." The newsman and the magazine writer laughed and shook their heads. Not one of them knew the precise meaning of such well-known BLM terms as "crossing permits . . . unauthorized use . . . Federal Range Code . . . grazing districts . . . (and later on) . . . Section 15 Lands . . . Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 . . . the regulations . . . unauthorized livestock."

We don't know why, but it always comes as a great shock to people inside BLM—division chiefs and technicians—to be told that the ordinary person, the average reader, simply doesn't understand BLM shop talk.

What does all this mean? In brief, it means that not one of our readers was anywhere near hooked. The sentence is overloaded and glutted; it tries to tell too much too soon, never giving the reader time to think—even if he knew the unfamiliar terms he was given to think with.

And to cap off the complexity, the writer misplaced a non-essential phrase-group, so this already loose phrase seems to modify "livestock" instead of "rules." Go back and see!

Even if our news writer insisted on sticking to shop-talk terms, he could have unpacked his lead a little and made it more simple, something like this:

> The Bureau of Land Management today announced a new rule putting 26 million acres of Federal range lands that are outside grazing districts under the same Range Code rules that govern lands inside grazing districts.

We got rid of such bureaucratic shop-talk as "crossing permits . . . reimbursement for . . . unauthorized use by livestock . . . similar to those (rules) provided by . . . extended to include . . ." We also chucked out the misplaced modifying phrase-group, and we cut the sentence from 46 to 34 words.

Admittedly, this simplified rewrite isn't simple enough, nor is it even close to being a good news story lead. However, weak as it is, it is still an "essay in simplicity" compared to the confounding complexity of the original.

Let's take a look at the second paragraph:

> The lands effected are the so-called Section 15 lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, which have not been included within Grazing Districts established under the *Taylor Grazing Act of 1934.*

Would this paragraph get through to the average reader? It probably wouldn't even dent him—let alone get through. Hard words and shop talk still hang heavy; the writer awkwardly separates the "which" clause from its modifier (Section 15 Lands) by tossing in the nonrestrictive aside, "administered by the Bureau of Land Management;" he further overloads the sentence by stuffing in another unnecessary fact of history, the "Taylor Grazing Act of 1934;" and he begins to fall into a story pattern that later will carry him to extremism in the defense of clarity—relentless repetition. Some repetition, especially in a complex story, is necessary; too much repetition is oppressing.

His second sentence could have been said along these lines, still using some of the BLM shop-talk he so passionately prefers:

> These lands outside Grazing Districts are called "Section 15 Lands." They are looked after by BLM.

We know some technicians will say that using "looked after" instead of the old standby "administered by" is unprecise and undignified; we say it's the only really readable sentence in the whole story so far.

Our rewrite still stinks—the lead's too long and complex—but it's got the original beat a press pickin' mile!

Now let's take the third paragraph and see how the writer actually ruins his own story by saying in this paragraph almost exactly what he said in the first and by using practically the same words to re-say the same thing.

This trap of repeating is a common one and it's a deadly one; it numbs the reader and kills the story. Writers seem to "snuggle into" this trap almost unknowingly, usually when they aren't satisfied with what they said before; so they "correct" the situation by saying it again and again. Look:

> The new amendment to the regulations sets crossing permit fees. It also establishes damage charges to be assessed against owners of unauthorized livestock on Section 15 Lands, so that the Federal Government will be compensated for forage used by the animals. This has been done by extending the provisions of the Federal Range Code for grazing districts to Section 15 Lands.

You spot the repetition immediately. In this third paragraph you didn't get a single new idea, hardly a new shop-talk term, and not even an attempt at saying the old thing in a new way.

The repetition really bugs out at you in the following chart:

Said in 1st paragraph	Said or repeated in paragraph 2	Repeated in paragraph 3
(1) "rules . . ."	.....	(1) "new amendment to regulations . . ."
(2) "provided by the Federal Range Code . . ."	.....	(2) "provisions of the Federal Range Code . . ."
(3) "for crossing permits and unauthorized use by livestock . . ."	.....	(3) "for crossing permits and damage charges for unauthorized livestock . . ."
(4) "land not in grazing districts . . . 26 million acres . . ."	"Section 15 Lands—those which have *not* been included . . . in grazing districts."	(4) "Section 15 Lands . . ." (not in grazing districts . . .)
(5) "Federal Range Code . . ."	.....	(5) "Federal Range Code . . ."
(6) "for grazing districts . . ."	.....	(6) "for grazing districts . . ."

Now here's paragraph 4; it's a little one, but repetitiously big enough for its size:

> The new rules (for the third time) will simplify grazing (ho hum) administration by making the rules (one more time) the same for both types of land (inside grazing districts, Section 15 Lands, lands outside grazing districts, 26 million acres . . .).

The fifth paragraph is longer—probably only because it happens to be a repetition of paragraph 3, which was pretty long itself—being a repetition of paragraph 1, which was itself pretty long (get the needless repetition?):

> The new rules provide that BLM will charge owners of straying livestock for forage consumed similar to charges assessed for grazing district lands.

Look at the following chart and see the repetitions of the repetitions:

Said in 3d paragraph	Repeated in 5th paragraph
(1) "new amendment"	(1) "new rules . . ."
(2) "provisions of . . ."	(2) "provide that . . ."
(3) "assessments for crossing permits and unauthorized livestock . . ."	(3) "charges for straying livestock . . ."
(4) "against owners . . ."	(4) "against owners . . ."
(5) "for forage used . . ."	(5) "for forage consumed . . ."
(6) "charges to be assessed . . ."	(6) "similar to charges assessed"
(7) "for grazing districts . . ."	(7) "for grazing districts . . ."

Even a quick count shows over 40 repetitions in the story; some are words, some are phrases, and some are ideas—all are repetitions.

All of this reminds us of the sign our 10th-grade teacher printed on the blackboard for us to ponder before we wrote anything:

"Why Why Why . . . . Say Say Say . . . . Something Something Something . . . . Thrice Thrice Thrice . . . . When When When . . . . Once Once Once . . . . Is Is Is . . . . Enough Enough Enough . . . . ???

Pretty ridiculous reading, isn't it?

One thing is clear: Even if our writer's news story had been excellent in all other respects, its rampant repetition would have killed it dead.

But even that wouldn't have mattered much to this story.

IT WAS BORN DEAD!

Read it over again and see, but, while you're reading, remember you don't belong to BLM. You're just an ordinary, average, typical, common, run-of-the-mill reader. You like to relax with your newspaper and you like your reading easy.

Here's how one State RUS-man handled this original news release.

Before rewriting it, he concluded:

(1) The story as written was unusable by any newspaper of any size anywhere.

(2) The story line itself—a minor change in a little known law that affects a limited number of ranchers—wasn't *big* enough for a long story in the bigger city dailies. But these papers might use a short item.

(3) A longer story probably would make print if circulated to "cow country papers."

Therefore, our RUS-man sent out two stories: A short one for dailies in bigger cities and a longer one for smaller papers in cow country.

Here's the short one:

> Ranchers who've been running cattle and sheep on some public range lands free in the past won't be able to do it any more.
>
> This "new rule" was announced today by Lowell W. Penny, Iowa State Director of the Bureau of Land Management.

Penny said: "In the past, half-a-million acres of Federal range lands in Iowa were not covered by BLM regulations. The new rule says they're covered now."

John P. Morley, rancher-president of the State Cattlemen's Association, said: "We've wanted this rule for a long time—it'll protect the range; we won't mind paying."

And here's the long one:

Ranchers who've been running cattle and sheep on some public range lands in the past, without permission and without paying, won't be able to do either any more.

From now on they'll pay for "regulated use permits," and the Bureau of Land Management will collect the money.

This is a new rule announced today by Lowell W. Penny, Iowa State Director of BLM.

Penny explained: "This new rule closes a hole left in the range laws 30 years ago when the Taylor Grazing Act was passed, setting up grazing districts to regulate range use, control overgrazing, and prevent erosion. But the act failed to include certain chunks of Federal range under its control and protection.

"As a result these left-out lands—called Section 15 Lands—have been open to uncontrolled used (and abuse!) by any rancher who wanted to turn his herds loose on them."

The new rule adopted today changes all that. From now on, ranchers who use Section 15 Lands (half-a-million acres in Iowa) will have to get a BLM permit and will have to pay the range-law rates.

Penny said: "This new rule won't bring in much money from Section 15 Lands, but it will mean that BLM can regulate their use and stop overgrazing. In the future we'll know how many cows and sheep we can let graze on them and for how long; and how many herds we can let trail over them, and how often."

Will this rule upset ranchers? Not according to Penny: "Ranchers have wanted it for years and they've told us so every chance they had."

And John P. Morley, president of the State Cattlemen's Association and a rancher himself, agreed: "We wanted this rule; it'll protect the range; it'll be good for everyone concerned."

When you write to John Q. Public, have something concrete to say; say it concretely, then quit.

NEWS RELEASE WRITING—MOSTLY ABOUT LEADS

IF you can get a good lead on your news release, you're halfway home with your story; some newsmen say three-fourths!

But what is a good lead? Well, unfortunately, it seems a good lead is something most of us in BLM don't write. Of 53 checked, 8 were passable, 5 were good, 1 was real good; 45 were poor, and many of these were plain terrible. The thing that hurt many of them was the writer sticking to the old who-when-what-where-why comprehensive lead, which, despite its 100-year-old reputation, simply says too much too soon.

This lead was developed during the Civil War, and it was an accident. Frantic Civil War correspondents had to file their stories over a dilapidated telegraph which usually broke down before the whole story got through. To make sure the basic facts got back home, these war-torn correspondents listed all the main facts first, then the rest in their order of importance. They figured that if they could get the cold facts through, the professional writers back home would warm them over and put them back in proper story form.

The big reason for de-emphasizing the 5W lead is that newspapers no longer have the monopoly they once had. Radio and TV have seen to that; the news stories that appear in print today are usually *old news* before the paper hits the street. As a result, good newspapers are more concerned with writing the story best, with interesting, "hooker" leads.

Time magazine, of course, is a sparkling example of how old news can be made new in the telling. Naturally, we don't want to write our BLM stories *Time*-style; newspapers aren't yet ready for *Time*-style, though some news writers are. Newsmen say: "If you want to get a good lead on your story, keep it simple, make it human, and tell it as one human to another. A good lead has that special something that makes it something special to people who read it."

This something special about a good lead is really unscientifically definable, but scientifically undefinable; it's like the *home* in a house, the *power* in a word, the *sweet* in a smile, the *soft* in a voice, the *twinkle* in an eye.

This means that many of today's experienced, top-notch news writers are now "playing the feature." There are literally dozens of ways of doing this, but they all boil down to something personal for each writer. He alone can find the feature, can feel and think about it like a human and write it simply for another human. However, for the amateur news man the 5W lead does give a time-tested formula, a framework to hang the facts on.

For contrast, look at two leads that headed the passage of the Wilderness bill:

> WASHINGTON, D.C.—The U.S. House of Representatives today passed the long-debated Wilderness bill, which puts 9.1 million acres of the

Nation's most beautiful wild country into a National Wilderness Preservation System and provides that 5.5 million additional acres, presently under administrative designation as "primitive areas," may be added to the system later by act of Congress.

Now see how a sensitive old pro, John Kamps of the Associated Press, found his own feature in the story:

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Not all of America is paved and lined with gas stations and some of it never will be.

Congress passed the Wilderness bill today.

Or take the day in 1909 when Mark Twain died and an obscure reporter wrote his "something special" lead this very human way:

EVERYWHERE, U.S.A.—Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are orphans tonight. Mark Twain is dead!

And a Texas reporter reached the human heart when he wrote of the burial of 450 youngsters who had been killed when their school exploded:

SOMEWHERE, TEXAS:—They're burying a generation here today.

Of course not every lead can be a literary masterpiece, but every lead, including every BLM lead, can be thought about, worked with, and written and rewritten until it's good, or at least as good as we can make it. Sometimes we'll miss, but that happens even to the Chaucers and the Hemingways.

We've picked out a few BLM leads and a couple of stories that could have been better with a little more thinking time and writing effort. We don't say these are especially bad; we picked them only because they were handy; they were typically BLM; and they needed work.

The Bureau of Land Management last week played host to five African students as a part of Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall's African Technical Exchange Program. The students are in this country attending American universities.

The program, which is jointly sponsored by the Interior Department, African Wildlife Leadership Federation, and private groups, is designed to acquaint selected African students with natural resource conservation principles and range management practices to generate new ideas for application in their homelands.

The students are from the nations Nigeria, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, Uganda, and Kenya.

Virgil Hart, BLM district manager for the Arizona Strip, directed the group through BLM Upper Clayhole Resource Conservation Area, located 25 miles south of Colorado City, explaining the system of water spreading structures, fencing devices, reseeding plots, and a unique dam for flood control. The students were particularly interested in this area, since portions of Africa have similar soil and climate conditions.

Upper Clayhole Resource Conservation Area is one of 85 similar areas administered by the BLM in the West as "showcase" sites to demonstrate wise soil and water management practices.

This week the students are continuing their tour with a visit to Grand Canyon National Park.

Here's a rewrite with a play on the feature:

PHOENIX.—Five African students found a touch of home in the Arizona Strip today.

And the Bureau of Land Management made them feel at home there.

Virgil Hart, BLM district manager in the Strip, took the students on an inspection tour of the Upper Clayhole Resource Conservation Area 25 miles south of Colorado City.

When they saw the area, they said: "The soil and climate here are a lot like some we have back home."

"Back home" to them is Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Northern and Southern Rhodesia.

Hart said: "They're in this country to learn about resource conservation and range management. We explained what BLM's doing, and we showed them a flood-control dam, a water-spreading system, a grass-seeding plot, and some fencing projects. They studied these things and said they could put them all to work on their own lands back home in Africa."

All five of these young men are studying in this country under the African Technical Exchange Program; they are attending various universities. The exchange program is jointly sponsored by the U.S. Interior Department, the African Wildlife Leadership Federation, and several other private groups.

After touring the Strip, the students headed for a fact-finding trip through Grand Canyon National Park.

Now let's look at the lead and second paragraph of a fire story. While not too bad, it's not too good. It fails to capture the motion and drama of the story, the hugeness of the fire, the weariness of the men, the final bringing of the fire under control, and the possibility of breaking up and going home in the morning if the wind doesn't change. The opening phrase (actually, it's night) is too quiet a way to introduce vivid action, and the "vivid action" turns out to be nothing more than firefighters "being optimisic." This is a vague, abstract, inactive action, not at all what you'd expect of rugged firefighters:

ELKO, August 19, 1964, 9:00 p.m. For the first time in several days, Bureau of Land Management firefighters around Elko are being optimistic. The last of the six big fires which raged over 350,000 acres was brought under control this afternoon, and if the weather remains favorable, BLM will probably start demobilizing its giant 2,300-man organization tomorrow morning.

In addition to professional firefighters from 7 States, BLM threw 23 planes, 18 helicopters, 64 crawler tractors, 22 pumper trucks, and 215 vehicles into the 5-day battle. The fires were the worst in Nevada history.

A quick study of this story tells us a couple of things that might have been featured in the lead:

(1) *The fire has been brought under control.* This could have been the feature, and it could have been written something like this:

ELKO.—(At the Bureau of Land Management Fire Camp, August 19, 9 p.m.)—The last of six rampaging range fires, which in the past 5 days burnt black 350,000 acres in a ring around Elko, was brought under control early this afternoon.

This might have been the lead, but we suspect that our BLM writer had another lead in mind. He's writing his story at 9 o'clock in the evening and the fire was controlled early in the afternoon; this news, no doubt, had already gone out. So—

(2) "BLM will probably start breaking up its giant, 2,300-man crew in the morning if the weather remains favorable." We think this is the intended story, for "the firefighters are being optimistic . . . for the first time in several days."

If this is the story, it could have been written along these lines:

> ELKO.—(At the Bureau of Land Management Fire Camp, August 19, 9 p.m.) "You can sleep like the dead here tonight and you can start home in the morning if the wind doesn't change."
>
> That's what Russ Penny told 2,300 blistered and bone-weary firefighters who'd been on the fireline 5 grueling days and nights, battling the biggest range fires in Nevada's history.
>
> Penny, who is the Nevada State director of the Bureau of Land Management, arrived back at camp here tonight, tired and smoke-filled, after inspecting the fireline that encircles Elko.
>
> He has spent the past 5 days—in his boots and on the phone—gathering firefighters from seven Western States and organizing them into fighting units. And he gave them tons of BLM steel and iron to fight with, 23 planes, 18 'copters, 64 bulldozers, 22 pumpers, and 215 vehicles.
>
> Before these men and metal won their battle this afternoon, the six fires had cooked over 350,000 acres of rangelands, burned seriously two ranchers, and claimed a pilot's life and his plane.
>
> Penny said: "This thing was awfu. but we've got it whipped. Only a change in the wind can hurt us now."

Now look at a story we had a little fun with. We'll tell you how after you read the original and the rewrite. Here's the original:

> Bureau of Land Management range manager Charles R. Cleary received a $300 special service award in Reno today for outstanding work last year in connection with two public land livestock trespass cases. Mr. Cleary is employed in BLM's Carson City District.
>
> BLM State director J. R. Penny said that the Government awarded Cleary in particular for his accomplishments in organizing and supervising the collection of data on a long-standing trespass case in the Carson City District involving about 1,000 cattle. Mr. Cleary was also praised for his presentation of evidence and testimony during an administrative hearing of that trespass case.
>
> "The Government's case was presented in practically a flawless manner. As a result, the hearing was completed in record time and with great savings to the public," said Penny.
>
> Penny presented a $300 check to Mr. Cleary during a brief ceremony in the BLM State office in Reno.

And here's the rewrite:

> CARSON CITY.—Catching cows copping grass that belongs to other cows on the Federal range can pay off in cold cash.
>
> It did this morning for Charles Cleary, a range manager for the Bureau of Land Management in the Carson City District; he picked up a $300 check as a special service award for getting the goods on 1,000 cheating cloven-hoofed critters who've been chewing up the Federal range west of here without a BLM license or permit.
>
> "Clearly caught 'em cold," said J. R. Penny, Nevada director of BLM, "and he had enough incriminating evidence to convict them in any court in the country." And Cleary did just that in a Federal hearings court that heard the case recently.

We told you we had fun with this particular rewrite and we did! Mostly because we didn't write it! We thought it had "cute possibilities" and sent it to the cutest-writingest feature man in town. We asked him, "How would you handle this story if you got it for rewrite?"

You've read how he handled it. He said he thought that the wires would pick it up as a "cute feature," and he also said he thought the rewritten story was a natural little feature for a front-page box on a good many dailies.

Now let's look at this lead:

> The release of a map brochure showing the general location of public lands and fishing waters in the State was announced jointly today by Governor Clifford P. Hansen and the Wyoming Bureau of Land Management State director, Ed Pierson. The map, the first of its kind, is available free to hunters, sportsmen, recreationists, and all public land users.

It might have been personalized and BLM-ized at least a little; maybe like this:

> Even if you're not a hunter or fisherman, you'll probably want to pick up a free copy of the beautifully illustrated, many-colored map of Wyoming published today by the Bureau of Land Management.

Here's another:

> The Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior, has entered into cooperative management agreements with the Oregon State Game Commission which provide for management of public lands in the Grande Ronde River area in Wallowa County and in the White River area in Wasco County. The public lands have primary value for wildlife and recreational uses, reported BLM State director, Russell E. Getty. The Game Commission will develop the public lands for the benefit of wildlife.

It's over-stuffed and difficult to read. The badly placed *which* clause hurts it some. In short, it doesn't flow like a river story should, and it doesn't flounce like a wildlife feature oughta. It could have been toned up a human touch, like so:

> Wildlife in some areas along the White River and the Grande Ronde will soon find their home a better place to live in.
>
> This was promised this morning by the State Game Commission and the Bureau of Land Management, who agreed to work together to develop the public lands along these rivers in Wasco and Wallowa Counties for the benefit of wildlife.
>
> Russell E. Getty, State director of BLM, announced this cooperative program at a news conference this afternoon.

This lead is probably acceptable but doesn't flow easily:

> Steps toward the enlargement of Dixie National Forest by 500 acres have been taken with the Bureau of Land Management by the Forest Service.

It has "prepositionitis" (six prepositions), but it hurts mostly because the writer apparently felt some sort of duty to get BLM into the lead. This is good if BLM belongs in the lead, fits there naturally and helps the reader move along easily. Sometimes, however, BLM can make more friends just by appearing naturally in the second or third paragraph. We think this is one of those *sometimes*. See how it sounds this way:

> The Forest Service wants to add 516 acres to the Dixie National Forest in southwest Utah.
>
> It applied to the Bureau of Land Management today, asking that many acres of public land be set aside south of Navajo Lake.

Here's a rather complicated lead that sounds like a lawyer at work on the land office's I&E typewriter:

> Proposed withdrawal of 470 acres of land in San Juan County from all forms of appropriation under the public land laws, including the general mining but not the mineral leasing laws, has been announced by the Bureau of Land Management, Santa Fe. The acreage is required (by the Bureau of Reclamation) for the construction of a cutter dam and regulating reservoir

which will be an integral part of the irrigation conveyance system from the Navajo Dam (on the San Juan River in the northwestern part of the State).

We had to dig up the items in parentheses for ourselves.

Here's our rewrite; simpler, isn't it?

The Bureau of Reclamation today asked that a hold be put on 470 acres of public land on the San Juan River in the northwestern corner of the State.

In asking the Bureau of Land Management to hold land, Reclamation officials said it was needed for a dam and reservoir on the river below the Navajo Dam.

The next story is particularly interesting, for it actually is two good short stories, rather than one long, legalistic one. The two stories treated as one in this release are:

(1) BLM's turning over 6,255.40 acres in lieu lands to the State;
(2) BLM's selling 2,240 acres of recreation land to the State Park Board.

The total acres in these two unlike transfers are lumped together:

SALT LAKE CITY.—Nearly 8,500 acres were transferred Tuesday from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to the State of Utah, according to R. D. Nielson, BLM State director for Utah.

While readable enough, it's not precise enough; it doesn't specify that there were *two* separate transfers of land. This specification is necessary here, for the whole story is built on the reader's understanding that fact. For example, the lead is followed immediately by two long paragraphs on the first transfer, without even explaining that this is one transfer of two:

The total included 6,255.40 acres selected by the State in lieu of lands granted Utah at the time of statehood, but which . . . .

This first transfer goes on for 169 words, 86 of which are almost diabolic shop talk on "withdrawals . . . State Enabling Act . . . prerequisites to any land transfers . . . complications in surveying . . . lack of funds . . . difficult terrain," etc., followed by another 83 words of painful legal descriptions of the lands involved in the first transfer.

Then the release leaves transfer No. 1 and heads into transfer No. 2, the better, more appealing story, in paragraph No. 4, like this:

Also transferred (think back to the lead!) to the State were 2,240 acres which the Utah State Park and Recreation Commission intends to establish as Goblin Valley State Park. Under provisions of the Recreation and Public Purposes Act, the Utah State Park and Recreation Commission paid $2.50 an acre, or $3,360 for the land . . . .

The second story was completed with one more paragraph of pure legal description and another paragraph on how the Park Commission intended to develop the land.

The two stories could have been handled separately like this:

SALT LAKE CITY.— The State today owns 6,255 more acres of land than it did yesterday.

R. D. Nielson, BLM State director . . . presented title . . . to Governor . . . etc.

And on the other:

> HANKSVILLE.—(Special)—The proposed Goblin Valley State Park moved 2,240 acres closer to reality here yesterday.
>
> That's how many acres of Federal land the Bureau of Land Management turned over to the State Park and Recreation Board at ceremonies held . . . etc., . . . etc.

Here's a lead that should startle you:

> After the biggest range fires in recent Nevada history burned themselves out over four counties, the Nevada State director of the Bureau of Land Management had some observations on why the Government went to such effort and expense to put them out.

If this news release actually means what it says, it means: BLM spent lots of time and money putting out fires that put themselves out!

Words have a tricky way of faking out the writer and shaking off the reader. They just don't line up the way you intended them to, and you may read them over and over the way they were never written in the first place. How about the poor reader? He can't read your mind, only your words.

Let's look at the first three paragraphs of this news release:

> After the biggest range fires in recent Nevada history burned themselves out over four counties, the Nevada State director of the Bureau of Land Management had some observations on why the Government went to such effort to put them out.
>
> In Reno, J. R. Penny noted that after every big range fire a school of thought is voiced which says, "It wasn't worth it"; or, "It was just brush and grass; why didn't you let it burn?"
>
> Penny admitted that controlled burning can at times be an important tool in range management, but reflecting on the "let the wild fires burn" school of thought, he gave six principal reasons for fighting range fires.

Putting this last paragraph in where it is was probably a mistake in strategy! This is no time to admit anything; the release is trying to convince; it can admit later if it still wants to.

Before we hack away at rewriting this story's lead, let's try to crawl into the State director's cap and "cue up" on his attitude.

We can assume he's neither placid nor peaceful. He just got through battling the biggest range fire in Nevada's history; he had 2,300 BLM'ers on the fireline; he used BLM equipment and spent lots of BLM money; and he had to listen to the chip-chop chatter of the "let-it-burn" boys. He is in no mood to sit serenely back and "note" and "reflect," nor to casually "have some observations." He's tired, ticked off and anxious!

Therefore, if we can capture his miffed, almost cranky mood, we might be able to make the story human and not at all placid. Let's see how it might have sounded:

> RENO.—(Special)—Some said: "Let it burn! It's only brush and grass! Why bother putting it out?"
>
> But Russ Penny said: "Put it out! It'll cook the land dead if we don't." And they did!

The "they" are the 2,300 Bureau of Land Management firefighters who battled 6 days and nights putting out the biggest range fire in Nevada's history, a fire that cooked and charred 350,000 acres of public and private range lands around Elko.

Russ Penny is the Nevada director of BLM. He gathered his firefighters from seven Western States, organized them into fighting units, and they got the fire out yesterday, late.

Penny arrived back in Reno this morning, "wired up" and weary. He said: "We finally got the blasted thing out! We spent lots of money and lots of men. And we'd like people to know *why* we spent both! Why we went to so much bother! Why we didn't just let it burn, like some people said we ought to!"

Penny rattled off six reasons why: (1) . . . (2) . . . (3) . . . (4). . . . (5) . . . (6)

Now look at one of the better leads we've received on a BLM story:

Tractors and giant drills under contract to the Bureau of Land Management began rolling into Elko County today to sow new life into nearly 300,000 acres blackened by range fires less than a month ago.

Yes, we think this lead is a good one. It has action, vividness, some tone-tempo and human interest; it's put together simply and moves along easily.

Below are three good leads from Larry Eichhorn, a range manager and wildlife man in the Lewistown district.

1. Heavy rains have slowed construction work on the Bureau of Land Management's Maiden Canyon Road through the Judith Mountains.

2. Public lands that everyone owns, including 549,000 acres the Bureau of Land Management looks after in Fergus County, are featured in a special publication received today at the BLM district office in Lewistown.

3. The Bureau of Land Management today asked contractors to bid on drilling three stockwater wells near Roundup.

These leads are simple and readable, darned good for an amateur, even plenty good for a pro, and all happen to be old-style 5W leads.

Be of stout heart, lads! You think you've got troubles—look at this paragraph release put out by another agency:

"Temperature Distribution in the Crystallization of Under-cooled Liquids in Cylindrical Tubes," by Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass., notes that numerical values of interface temperatures rise as a function of the various parameters of a capillary crystallization experiment are presented. These results should aid in the design and interpretation of future investigations of solidification kinetics by the capillary method.

And with that lush lump of language, we'll leave you "average readers" to your own devices and dictionaries.

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1975 O—593-622